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JANUARY

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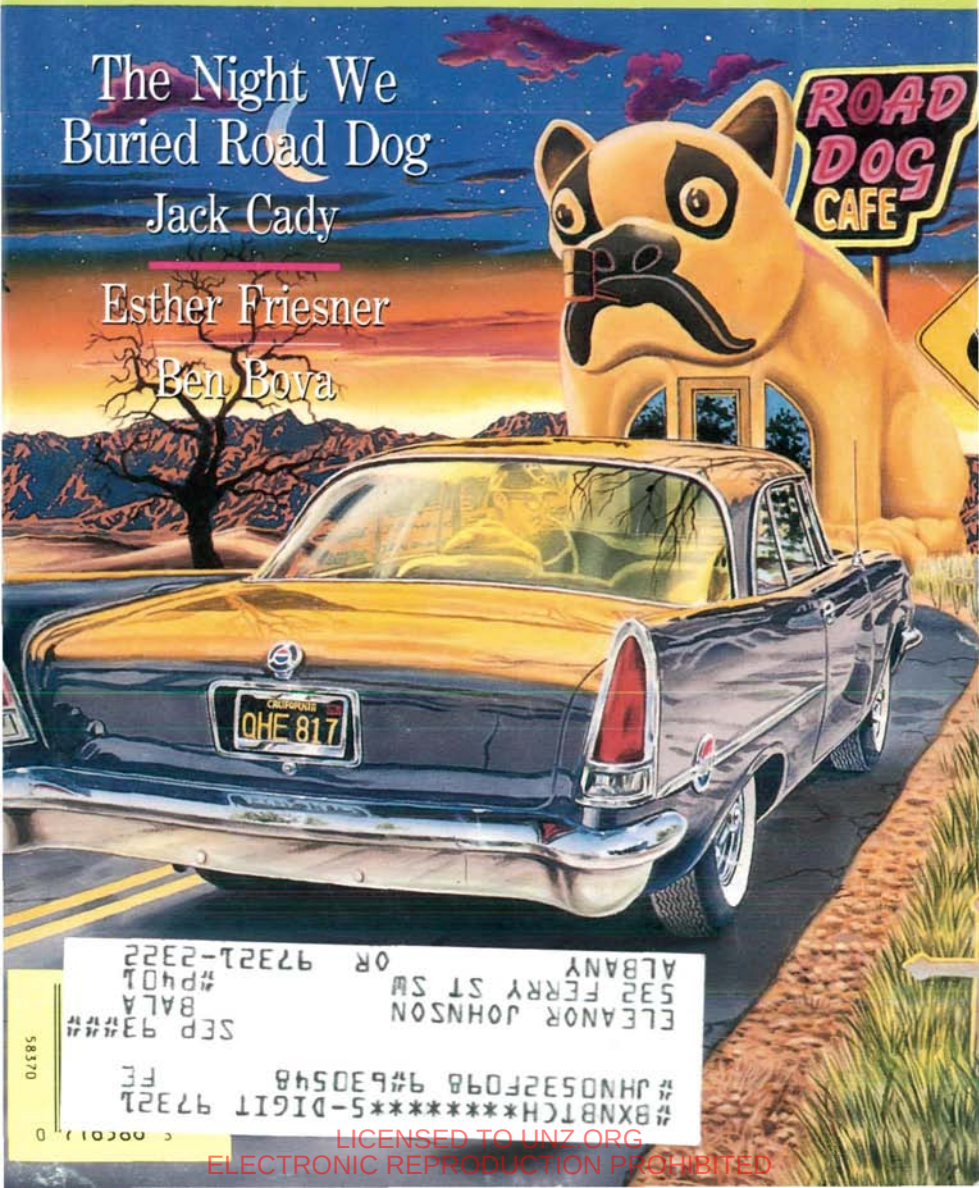

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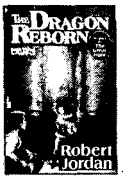

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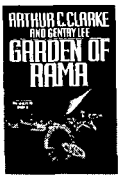

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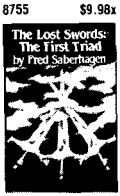

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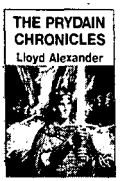

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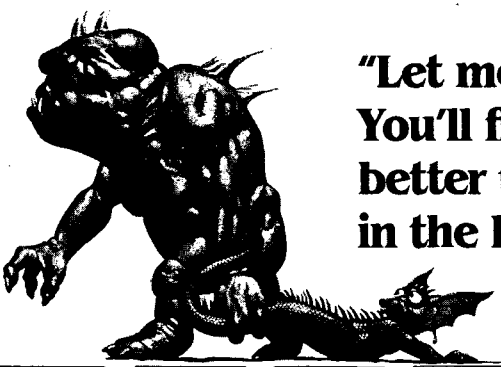

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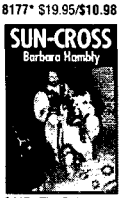

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction

JANUARY • 44th Year of Publication

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

DEADLINES. I am an absolute stickler for deadlines. It comes from my radio days, when a missed deadline meant half an hour of "dead air." "Dead air" was the worst sin a radio personality could commit.

If it weren't for deadlines I would be asleep right now.

But the editorial will be faxed tomorrow morning, on schedule, and after that, I will catch up on my sleep.

None of this is your concern, except that the thing which has kept me from meeting my deadline is this editorial.

Huh? Let me back up.

It seems, in my short tenure as editor, I have presided over a number of transitions, none of which I am happy about. This issue marks another. Algis Budrys has contributed his last column. Another magazine has snatched him away, this time as editor, and he feels that editing one magazine and reviewing for another mark a conflict of interest, so he moves on.

So do we.

But in the last few days, I caught a wave of nostalgia. I have dug through back issues of F&SF until my fingers are gritty with dust. I read A.J.'s[1] columns at random, finding gems, bits of wisdom I had forgotten or had never read, predictions that came true, and wonderful, insightful language that makes reviews of books out of print worth reading. Over the past seventeen years, he has reviewed almost everyone, from Frederik Pohl and Kate Wilhelm to Edward Bryant and Roger Zelazny to Robert Reed and Nina Kiriki Hoffman. (As I leafed through the issues, I also found myself sampling Isaac's columns, and missing them, and rereading stories I had loved the first time around, and just plain scaring myself with the weight [the dust] of all that history.)

In his last column, A.J. gives an account of the history of criticism in

[1] *I'm sorry, A.J. I know that your professional by-line is Algis. I can't bring myself to use it in this essay.*

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the sf field, but he doesn't really say much about the columns he wrote here. The first one appeared in November, 1975, along with his novella, "The Silent Eyes of Time." Go back and read that essay. He discusses two books still debated in the field: Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, and Pamela Sargent's *Women of Wonder*.

But the analysis, as insightful as it is, isn't the best part of that first essay. The best part is the hook, in which A.J. introduces himself:

> Here we are, alone together and possibly strangers.
>
> I know who you are. Trust me. Who am I? Well, I'm of the opinion that my purpose here is to recommend reading to you, to state my reasons, to shed light on larger relevant good thoughts, to embattle error shrewdly, and to refrain from inventing my facts.
>
> I don't know what such a person is called.
>
> I am not a critic. Critics consider litrature as a branch of progress toward human self-knowledge. They thus perform a valuable function, and I'm flattered to be on the Pilgrim Award committee which recognizes them for it. But what you and I do here is something else. I pass you reading matter, and you look at me askance.
>
> I am not a book reviewer. Reviewers perform for bare spaces on coffee tables and for children in pressing need of a school "book report." The best reviewers spare all necessity of reading.

What it is, I think, is that you and I and all our other kinsmen are here waiting between trains in a small town on the windward slope of Parnassus. I don't smoke any more, I really shouldn't eat as much as I already have, and it would be unseemly to drink or make love here among the travelling bags and the hard old benches. So let's talk.

Which is what we have done. We have talked with Algis Budrys for seventeen years about books. It has been a good conversation, a satisfying one, but the train has finally come, to whisk A.J. to a magazine called *Tomorrow*, and we wait here, hoping to have another conversation as good as the last.

Orson Scott Card will remain, of course, continuing his part in the dialog, and in the next months, I'll introduce you to the newest person on the platform. In the meantime, the good-byes must be said, and the last bit of information passed before the conductor calls "All Aboard!" One more column waits, and it is a good one, indeed.

Now I must print this editorial, and return the magazines to the shelf in my office. I will probably get trapped there, reading old columns and old stories, and not sleep until dawn.

We're lucky to have conversations like this one: conversations in print are more than a memory. They are a doorway into the precious moments of our past.

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Ben Bova has written 75 futuristic novels and non-fiction books. He has also published countless short stories. His most recent novel, MARS, appeared in June from Bantam Books. Ben calls it "a big Michener-esque tale of the first people to explore the red planet, and the families, lovers, friends and enemies they leave behind on Earth." "Re-Entry Shock" is the opposite kind of science fiction: it deals with life on the small scale. The story focuses on one person instead of many, a few days instead of years, but the story's implications go far beyond the handful of pages it takes to tell the tale.

Re-Entry Shock

By Ben Bova

"The tests are for your own protection," he said. "Surely you can understand that."

"I can understand that you are trying to prevent me from returning to my home," Dolores flared angrily. And immediately regretted her outburst. It would do her no good to lose her temper with this little man.

The two of them were sitting in a low-ceilinged windowless room that might have been anywhere on Earth or the Moon. In fact, it was on the space station that served as the major transfer point for those few special people allowed to travel from the Moon to Earth or vice versa.

"It's nothing personal," the interviewer said, looking at the display screen on his desk instead of at Dolores. "We simply cannot allow someone to return just because they announce that they want to."

"So you say," she replied.

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"The tests are for your own protection," he repeated, weakly.

"Yes. Of course." She had been through the whole grueling routine for more than a week now. "I have passed all the tests. I can handle the gravity. The difference in air pressure. I am not carrying any diseases. There is no physical reason to keep me from returning."

"But you've been away nearly ten years. The cultural shock, the readjustment — the psychological problems often outweigh the physical ones. It's not simply a matter of buying a return ticket and boarding a shuttle."

"I know. I have been told time and again that it is a privilege, not a right."

The interviewer lifted his eyes from his display screen and looked directly at her for the first time. "Are you absolutely certain you want to do this?" he asked. "After ten years — are you willing to give up your whole life, your friends and all, just to come back?"

Dolores glanced at the nameplate on his desk. "Yes, Mr. Briem," she said icily. "That is precisely what I want to do."

"But why?"

Dolores Anna Maria Alvarez de Montoya leaned back in the spindly plastic chair. It creaked in complaint. She was a solidly built woman in her early forties, with a strong-boned deeply tanned face. Her dark straight hair, graying prematurely, was tied back in a single long braid. To the interviewer she looked exactly like what the computer files said she was: a journeyman construction worker with a questionable political background. A problem.

"I want to be able to breathe freely again," Dolores answered slowly. "I've lived like an ant in a hive long enough. Hemmed in by their laws and regulations. People weren't meant to live like that. I want to come back home."

For a long moment the interviewer stared at Dolores, his Nordic blue eyes locked on her deep onyx pools. Then he turned back toward the display screen on his desk as if he could see more of her through her records than by watching the woman herself.

"You say 'home.' You've been away nearly ten years."

"It is still my home," Dolores said firmly. "I was born there. My roots are there."

"Your son is there."

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She had expected that. Yet she still drew in her breath at the pain. "Yes," she conceded. "My son is there."

"You left of your own volition. You declared that you never wanted to come back. You renounced your citizenship."

"That was ten years ago."

"You've changed your mind — after ten years."

"I was very foolish then. I was under great emotional stress. A divorce..." She let her voice trail off. She did not mention the fierce political passions that had burned within her back in those days.

"Yes," said the interviewer. "Very foolish."

C. Briem: that was all his nameplate said. He did not seem to Dolores to be a really nasty man. Not very sympathetic, naturally. But not the totally cold inhuman kind of bureaucrat she had seen so often over the years. He was quite young, she thought, for a position of such power. Young and rather attractive, with hair the color of afternoon sunshine, cropped short and neat. And good shoulders beneath his severely tailored one-piece suit. It was spotless white, of course. Dolores wore her one and only business suit, gray and shabby after all the years of hanging in closets or being folded in a tight travel bag. She had worn it only at the rallies and late-night meetings she had attended; fewer and fewer, as the years passed by.

Over the past week Dolores had gone through a dozen interviews like this one. And the complete battery of physical tests. This man behind the desk had the power to recommend that she be allowed to return to her home, or to keep her locked out and exiled from her roots, her memories, her only son.

"How old is your boy now?" he suddenly asked.

Startled, Dolores answered, "Eleven — no, he'll be twelve years old next month. I was hoping to get back in time to see him on his birthday."

"We really don't want any more immigrant laborers," he said, trying to make his voice hard but not quite able to do so.

"I am not an immigrant," Dolores replied firmly. "I am a native. And I am not a laborer. I am a fluid systems technician."

"A plumber."

She smiled tolerantly. "A plumber who works on fusion power plants. They require excellent piping and welding. I run the machines that do such work. It is all in the dossier on your screen, I'm sure."

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He conceded his point with a dip of his chin. "You've worked on fusion plants for all the ten years you were out there?"

"Most of the time. I did some work on solar power systems as well. They also require excellent plumbing."

For long moments the interviewer said nothing, staring at the screen as if it would tell him what to do, which decision to make.

Finally he returned his gaze to Dolores. "I will have to consult the immigration board, Ms. Alvarez. You will have to wait for their decision."

"How long will that take?"

He blinked his blue eyes once, twice. "A day or so. Perhaps longer."

"Then I must remain aboard this station until they decide?"

"Of course. Your expenses will be paid by the government on its regular per-diem allowance."

Dolores felt her nostrils flare. Government per-diem allowances did not come anywhere near the prices charged by the station's restaurants or the hotel. And it usually took months for any government to honor the expense reports that per-diem people sent in.

She got to her feet. "I hope it will be a quick decision, then."

The interviewer remained seated, but seemed to thaw just a bit. "No, Ms. Alvarez. Hope for a slow decision. The more time they take to make up their minds, the better your chances."

Dolores murmured, "Like a jury deciding a person's life or death."

"Yes," he said sadly, "Very much like that."

DOLORES DRIFTED through the rest of the day, walking through the long sloping passageways of the circular station, heading away from the administrative offices with their impersonal interviewers and computerized records of a woman's entire life.

Do they know? she asked herself silently. Do they suspect why I want to return? Of course they must have records of my old political activities, but do they know what I am trying to accomplish now?

Even when the three lunar colonies had united in declaring their independence from the World Government, the separation between the peoples of Earth and those living in space had never been total. Governments might rage and threaten, corporations might cut off entire colonies from desperately needed trade, but still a trickle of people made it from

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space back to Mother Earth. And vice versa. The journey was often painful and always mired in red tape, but as far as Dolores knew no one had ever been flatly denied permission to go home again.

Until now.

The other people striding along the wide passageways were mostly administrative staff personnel who wore one-piece jumpsuits, as had the handsome young Mr. Briem. White, sky-blue, fire-engine-red, grassy green, their colors denoted the wearers' jobs. But as Dolores neared the area where the tourist shops and restaurants were located, the people around her changed.

The tourists dressed with far more variety: men in brilliantly colored running suits or conservative business outfits such as Dolores herself wore; the younger women showing bare midriffs, long shapely legs glossy with the sheen of hosiery, startling makeup and hairdos.

The space station was huge, massive, like a small city in orbit. As she strolled aimlessly along its passageways Dolores realized that the station had grown in the ten years since she had last seen it. It was like Samarkand or Damascus or any of those other ancient cities along the old caravan trails: a center of commerce and trade, even tourism. Surely the restrictions against returning home were easier now than they had been ten years before.

Then she realized that these tourists were aboard a space station that orbited a mere five hundred kilometers above Earth's surface. They would not be allowed to go to the Moon or to one of the O'Neil habitats. They were flatlanders on vacation. And there were almost no lunar citizens or residents of O'Neil communities here in this station. At least, none that she could identify.

She caught a glance of the Earth hanging outside one of the rare windows along the passageway, huge and blue and glowing with beauty. Five hundred kilometers away. Only five hundred kilometers.

As the station swung in its stately rotation the view of Earth passed out of sight. Dolores saw the distant Moon hanging against the black background of deep space. Then even that passed and there was nothing to see but the infinite emptiness.

Will they find out? Dolores wondered. Is there something in my record, something I might have said during the interviews, some tiny hint, that will betray me?

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She stopped in mid-stride, almost stumbled as a sudden bolt of electrical surprise flashed through her. Hector Luis! Her son!

But then she saw that it was merely a curly-haired boy of ten or twelve, a stranger walking with his trusting hand firmly in the grasp of a man who must have been his father. Dolores watched them pass by without so much as a flicker of a glance at her. As if she were not there in the corridor with them. As if she did not exist.

The last hologram she had seen of her son had been more than a year ago. The boy walking past looked nothing like Hector Luis, really. The same height maybe. Not even a similar build.

You are becoming maudlin, she chided herself.

She realized that she was in the midst of the shopping area. Store windows stretched on both sides of the passageway, merchandise of all sorts glittered brightly in the attractive displays. Maybe I can find something for Hector Luis, she thought. Maybe if I buy a gift for him it will impress the immigration board. She had no doubt that they were watching her. Yet she felt slightly ashamed of her thought, using her son as a tool to pry open the board members' hearts.

She window-shopped until she lost track of the time. The more she gazed at the lush variety of merchandise the more confused she became. What would a twelve-year-old boy like? What does her son like? She had no idea.

Finally her stomach told her that she had missed lunch and it was almost time for supper. There were restaurants further up the corridor. Dolores frowned inwardly: the government's munificent per-diem allowance might just cover the price of a beer.

With a shrug she moved through the meandering tourists and headed for a meal she could barely afford. She studied the menus displayed on the electronic screens outside each of the four restaurants, then entered the least expensive.

She hardly felt any surprise at all when she saw that Mr. Briem was already seated at a table by the window, alone. Yes, they are certainly watching me.

He saw Dolores as she approached his table.

"*Buenas tardes*, Mr. Briem," she said, with a gracious nod of her head.

"Ms. Alvarez!" He scrambled to his feet and pretended to be surprised. "Would you care to join me? I just came in here a few moments ago."

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"I would be very happy to. It is very lonely to eat by one's self."

"Yes," he said. "It is."

Dolores sat across the little square table from him and they studied the menu screen for a few moments. She grimaced at the prices but Briem did not seem to notice.

They tapped out their orders on the keyboard. Then Dolores asked politely, "Do you come here often?"

He made a small shrug. "When I get tired of my own cooking. Often enough."

A young woman walked up to the table, petite, oriental-looking. "Hi, Cal. A little early for you, isn't it?"

"I'm going to the concert tonight," he answered quickly.

"Oh so?" The woman glanced at Dolores, then turned her eyes back to him. "Me too."

"I'll see you there, then."

"Good. Maybe we can have dessert or coffee together afterward."

Briem nodded and smiled. It was an innocent smile, Dolores thought. It almost made her believe that he truly was in this restaurant because he was going to a concert later in the evening and the young oriental was not an agent of the immigration department or a bodyguard assigned to watch over him while he dealt with this would-be infiltrator.

"Your first name is Calvin?" Dolores asked.

"Calvert," he replied. "I prefer Cal. It sounds less like an old British mystery story."

"I am called Dolores. My especial friends call me Dee."

His smile came back, warmer this time. The robot rolled up to their table with their trays of dinner on its flat top. They started to eat.

"I was thinking of buying my son a present," Dolores said, "but I don't know what to get him. What are twelve-year-old boys interested in these days?"

"I really don't know."

"There is so much in the store windows! It's rather overwhelming."

"You haven't gone shopping for a while?"

"Not for a long time. Where I was, there were no stores. Not gift stores. I suppose I have missed a lot of things in the past ten years."

They fell silent for a few moments. Dolores turned her attention to her broth. It was thin and delicately flavored, not like the rich heavy soups she

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was accustomed to.

"Ms. Alvarez — "

"Dolores."

"Dolores, then." Cal Briem looked troubled. "I suppose I shouldn't bring up the subject. It's none of my affair, really..."

"What is it?"

"Your political activities."

"Ah." She had known it would come up sooner or later. At least he was bringing it out into the open.

"You were quite an activist in your younger days. But over the past few years you seem to have stopped."

"I have grown older."

He looked at her, *really* looked at her, for a long silent moment.

"I can't accept the idea that you've given up your beliefs," he said at last.

"I was never a radical. I never advocated violence. During the times of the great labor unrest I served as a mediator more than once."

"We know. It's in your record."

She put down her spoon, tired of the whole charade. "Then my political beliefs are going to be counted against me, aren't they?"

"They don't help," he said softly.

"You are going to prevent me from returning home because my political position is not acceptable to you."

"Did you marry again?" He changed the subject. "We have no record of it if you did."

"No. I did not marry again."

"For ten years you've remained unmarried?"

She recognized the unvoiced question. "After the terrible mess of my first marriage, I never allowed myself to become so attached to someone that he could cause me pain."

"I see," he said.

"Besides," Dolores added, "where I was, out on the construction jobs, there were not that many men who were both eligible and attractive."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe it," she said fervently.

"Your political activities broke up your marriage, didn't they?"

She fought an urge to laugh. Raoul's father owned half of the solar system's largest construction firm. "They did not help to cement us

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together, no," she said.

"Have you given up your political activities altogether?" he asked, his voice trembling slightly.

Dolores spooned up another sip of broth before answering. "Yes," she half-lied. "But I still have my beliefs."

"Of course."

They finished the brief meal in virtual silence. When their bills appeared on the table's display screen Briem gently pushed Dolores' hand aside and tapped his own number on the keyboard.

"Let the immigration board pay for this," he said, smiling shyly. "They can afford it better than you."

"*Muchas gracias,*" said Dolores. But inwardly she asked herself, Why is he doing this? What advantage does he expect to gain?

"Would you like to go to the concert?" he asked as they got up from the table.

Dolores thought a moment. Then, "No, I think not. Thank you anyway. I appreciate your kindness."

As they walked out into the broad passageway again, Briem said, "Your son's been living all this time with his father, hasn't he?"

Again she felt the stab of pain. And anger. What is he trying to do to me? Dolores raged inwardly. "I don't think you have any right to probe into my personal affairs," she snapped.

His face went red. "Oh, I didn't mean — I was only trying to be helpful. You had asked about what the boy might be interested in . . ."

The anger drained out of her as quickly as it had risen. "I'm sorry. I have always been too quick to lose my temper."

"It's understandable," Briem said.

"One would think that at my age I would have learned better self-control."

"*De nada.*" he said, with an atrocious accent.

But she smiled at his attempt to defuse the situation. Then she caught a view of Earth again in the window across the passageway. Dolores headed toward it like a woman lured by a lover, like a sliver of iron pulled by a magnet.

Briem walked beside her. "I really should be getting to the auditorium. The concert."

"Yes," Dolores muttered, staring at the glowing blue and white pan-

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orama parading before her eyes. "Of course."

He grasped her sleeve, forcing her to tear her eyes away and look at him.

"Tell me what you learned in the ten years you were away," he said, suddenly urgent. "Tell me the most important thing you've learned."

She blinked at the fervor in his voice, the intensity of his expression. "The most important?"

"I know you still have a political agenda. You haven't given up all your hopes, your ideals. But what did the past ten years teach you?"

Dolores put aside all pretense. She knew she was ending all her hopes for returning home, killing her only chance to see her son once again. But she told him anyway, without evasion, without pretense.

"They need us. They cannot survive without us. Nor can we truly survive without them. This enforced separation is killing us both."

Strangely, Briem smiled. "They need us," he echoed. "And we need them."

Dolores nodded dumbly, her eyes drawn back to the gleaming beckoning sprawl of the world she had left.

"We've changed too," Briem said softly, almost in a whisper. "Some of us have, at least. There are a few of us who realize that we can't remain separated. A few of us who believe exactly what you believe."

"Can that be true?"

"Yes," he said. "The human race must not remain separated into the wealthy few who live in space and the impoverished billions on Earth. That way is worse than madness. It's evil."

"You know what I want to do, then. You have known it all along."

"I suspected it," said Briem. "And I'm glad that my suspicions were correct. We need people like you: people who've been there and can convince the government and the voters that we *must* re-establish strong ties with our brothers and sisters."

Dolores felt giddy, almost faint. "Then you will recommend — "

"I'm the chairman of the immigration board," Briem revealed. "Your application for return will be approved, I promise you."

Her thoughts tumbled dizzyingly in her mind, but the one that stood out most powerfully was that she would see her son again. I will see Hector Luis! I will hold him in my arms!

"Now I've really got to get to that concert," Briem said. "I'm playing second keyboard tonight."

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"Yes," Dolores said vaguely. "I am sorry to have kept you."

He flashed her a smile and dashed off down the passageway.

"And thank you!" Dolores called after him.

Then she turned back to the window. Five hundred kilometers away was the Earth she had left only a week ago. The Earth on which she had spent ten years, working in their filthy choked cities, living among the helpless and the hopeless, trying to change their world, to make their lives better, learning day by painful day that they could not long survive without the wealth, the knowledge, the skills that the space communities had denied them.

The Earth slid from her view and she saw the Moon once again, clean and cool, distant yet reachable. She would return to the world of her birth, she realized. She would work with all the passion and strength in her to make them understand the debt they owed to the people of Earth. She would reunite the severed family of humankind.

And she would see her son and make him understand that despite everything she loved him. Perhaps she would even reunite her own severed family.

Dolores smiled to herself. She was dreaming impossible dreams and she knew it. But without the dreams, she also knew, there can be no reality.

"The man at the next table would like you to join him, sir."

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Why Do Birds, Damon Knight, Tor, $17.95

. . . and one other thing.

YOU DON'T remember, probably. But Damon Knight started this whole business, with book reviews sandwiched into a number of pulp magazines, in the 1950's.

There had been reviews before this, of course — although there were *very* few books. But the reviews were either bland and neutral or, for the most part, shameless boosterism. Any book that actually appeared was dubbed marvelous, and a Must Buy item. And for the most part, they weren't. That is the kindest thing you can say about them; that they weren't marvelous.

I can see a kind of sense in the booster reviews, although I don't agree with doing them the way they were done. In those days, there were, indeed, *very* few books, and what books there were ought, logically, to have been supported. But that's not what the reviewers said. They said they were marvelous.

Until Damon. Hoo, boy! He took an ax to those books, and to whole bodies of work. He said Sturgeon was marvelous. He said van Vogt was a piece of cheese. And, Lo, it was so. So thoroughly did he destroy van Vogt that overnight a man who had been one of the stalwarts of *Astounding,* not only respected but eagerly awaited, became a drug on the market . . . to this day, begging everyone's pardon. From your present viewpoint, you will find it hard to credit that van Vogt was ever anything special. But he was. And Damon destroyed him overnight, which may have been his intention, and which van Vogt may — or may not — have deserved. But we forget something — all Damon said was that *in his opinion,* van Vogt was a piece of cheese, just as he said that in his opinion Ted Sturgeon was damned good. There is nothing wrong with that; there is a great deal that is right.

Damon published a book, *In Search of Wonder,* which won a Hugo

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— the first Hugo ever given for a book of reviews. And the one most deserved. In it, he had the van Vogt destruction, and the Sturgeon apotheosis, and a lot of other things besides. . . revolutionized book reviewing in this field, to an extent you probably don't realize either, so accustomed are you to it. But name another field in which, in the same media that publish fiction, you get honest reviews of fiction. Name it, and you name a field that imitates SF, because Damon was the first.

He never, or almost never, had his own outlet. For a moment — three months — he published a magazine, for Hillman. When Mr. Hillman saw what Damon had done, he cancelled it. The rest of the time, Damon reviewed here, and there, and finally, literally here. He was the book reviewer for F&SF for a while, and it was in F&SF that he brought his reviewing to a close, and has never really resumed it.

What he was best at, I think, was reviewing the almost good. Jerry Sohl, J.T. M'Intosh, and that ilk. He took their works apart, and found what was wrong, as no one else could do it. That was his real value; I know I learned a very great deal from reading those reviews, and I doubt if I was alone. Nor, truth to tell, was I alone in thinking there was more to Sturgeon than Damon had encompassed, and more to van Vogt, as well; I was not quite as comfortable either with his sometimes fulsome praise, nor with his utter condemnation. But they proceeded from a total conviction; Damon was sure he was right, every time, and that has its charms.

Mind you, like everyone else, Damon also wrote fiction, and that has never stopped. At the same time as he did his reviewing, he was publishing tales like "The Cabin Boy," and many another . . . "Not With a Bang," from these pages, is still cited over and over in fannish conversation, often without attribution because the majority of fans don't realize it isn't a fannish folk tale. And much the same is true of "Eripmav."

But it was the reviewing that started a tradition in SF that has never really died. After Damon, or simultaneous with Damon but continuing after him was James Blish, who began in the fanzines as William Atheling, Jr., but continued in the prozines under his own name. And then there was me.

I started late in the Sixties, in *Galaxy*, and have never really quit for any length of time. I have come a ways from Damon Knight's model, and James Blish's, but that's to be expected. In any case, the line of descent is clear. We try to stay above the merchandising, we try to look at books from the sometimes

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bewildered and dismayed reader's point of view, and we don't always succeed but we always try. In the end, we have to, or Damon will rise up and smite us. He will be wrong some of the time, but his attitude will always be the right one.

And he is still very much alive; an extravagantly bearded, sometimes cantankerous, always interesting man who lives in Eugene, OR, with his wife, Kate Wilhelm, and takes no crap from anyone. And he has written, as he does periodically, a book.

The book is *Why Do Birds*, no question mark, and the title itself makes no overt sense. But that's all right; it actually makes perfect sense. It's about Ed Stone — or just maybe he's really Howard Filer — who claims to have been kidnapped by aliens in 1931. It is now 2002, and he has just been released from suspended animation, with a mission. The mission is to put all mankind in a box, so that the aliens can take them away before the Earth is destroyed. All he has by way of an enabler is a ring; shake his hand, and you believe him. Of course, that's a pretty good enabler.

I will tell you now that the book does not work. Damon's books rarely do, as very much distinguished from his novelettes and short stories. In fact, as a rule of thumb, you can bet that the shorter he writes, the better he is, with *The World and Thorinn* being the sole exception among the Knight books I've read. Generally speaking, something goes out of the longer Knight fiction. Something certainly goes out of *Why Do Birds*. But it is a fun book in many ways nonetheless.

The front part is a joy. Stone pokes hole after hole in the world as we know it (or will soon know it), going along with a kind of *idiot savant* innocence, trying to make sense of the world in 1931 ways, with its two billion population in contrast of the six billion of 2002, its relative lack of pollution, its continents separated by days, not hours, and its degree of overt sexuality summed up by a black and white motion picture of Ginger Rogers dancing in front of a window in a sort of see-through skirt.

But things go wrong with the book. Why, for instance, does Lavalle do what she does after her plane trip? Stone still has the ring, and she has shaken his hand. How *can* she do what she does? It would only take a sentence to justify her actions, but the sentence is not there.

For another example, there is the box itself. For a while, everybody going into it was going to be placed in a sort of Earth-invented stasis field. Then, at the last minute, they were not. But at the *very* last minute . . . Well, I don't think Damon

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resolved that issue; not where I could see it. And in fact the box sequence is scamped, as soon as Damon has figured out how it would work, just as the movement of people out of various corners of the world is scamped, once Damon has figured out how it would work; he has neglected to show us it working in sufficient detail. In the final sections of the book, we see the box and its operations only in the merest brushstrokes, and that's not quite enough. Just as it's not enough to bring up Howard Filer and then just drop him. It really isn't; I couldn't, in the end, figure out what the Howard Filer sequence is.

The stasis field is nice. The stasis field is lovely; a genuine SF idea that as far as I know has not been working in this manner before. And of course the central idea of the book is new, but I'm not as sure about that idea, because the actual events of the ending are not made clear, for all Damon's talk about the effects of the Earth's curvature, etc. I do know *what* happens, sort of. And it's implicit in the premise that we will never know why. But I don't know enough, somewhere. Again, it would only take an extra sentence, and it isn't there.

Many parts of the book strike me as bits and pieces that have occurred to Damon before, and which are not pushed to any point in particular. The finding of code (?) messages in the work of Charles Willard Diffin, for instance, is (A) a recapitulation of an idea that Damon had years ago, in which ostensible typographical errors in manuscript spelled out a message, and, more important, (B) doesn't mean a thing in the end, and he did it better the first time.

Is it Ed Stone that gets killed in the end? Why? Yes, the ring is losing power rapidly, but there is no sentence that tells us it is completely exhausted. And about spending all that time aboard a helium-filled zeppelin, which then burns catastrophically in exactly the way the hydrogen-filled *Hindenburg* did burn . . . what was it, exactly, that caught fire so viciously and rapidly? (And incidentally gets rid of a number of characters at a stroke.) Have I missed something? If so, is that my fault? I don't think so. It's fine to have an ending in which all human piety and wit are meaningless, but you've got to have a middle in which that's set up unequivocally. And what about all the people —there seem to be quite a few —who *don't* get in the box? We begin by saying everybody's going to get in the box, but suddenly that's not true. Where does Damon explain that?

For what it's worth, I think I've figured out what it is Damon does wrong in books. He figures out every-

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thing, and very nicely, too; you can see the machinery in his brain, and it's elegant. But he forgets to translate parts of it for the reader. He gets so caught up in the beauty of the notion that I think he forgets the reader does not share until it gets down on paper, and does not share the notion fully until it gets down on paper fully.

Of course, flawed Knight is better than no Knight, and better than the smoothly polished work of many another. But. . . .

That brings me to my final point.

It really is a final point. I am leaving you, only to return in another guise entirely. Someone has seen fit to give me a new magazine, with sufficient financing to make it work, and I am going to be, for the first time, an SF magazine editor.

I have been all kinds of editor over the past forty years. Assistant editor for Gnome Press and *Galaxy* magazine, slush reader for *Ellery Queen's*, *F&SF*, and later assistant editor of *Venture*; house editor/writer/troublemaker for a string of car magazines; editor in chief of Regency Books, which led directly to my being hired away to be editor of Playboy Press (the book-publishing arm); Operations Manager of the Woodall Publishing Company, when it published a string of magazines dealing with trailers, camping, and manufactured housing; editor, for the first seven volumes, of the *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of The Future* annual series. And the *Galaxy* columns were collected, all of them, by Southern Illinois University Press in 1985, under the title of *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf by Algis Budrys*, which is the full title of the book because other people besides me did Galaxy Bookshelf columns. It turns out to run from 1964 to 1971, so I've actually been reviewing in a column for rather longer than the "late 1960s"; I didn't realize that until I picked up a copy of the book just now. In any case, it'll be out in a trade paperback reprint pretty soon now and there'll be other volumes in the series, from *F&SF*, one of these days not so soon now. Busy, busy, busy.

I've been a lot of things, most of them mentionable in polite company, but until now for one reason or another I've never done an SF magazine. I think it will be very interesting.

But it precludes my reviewing SF. And so the string, which began in the middle 1960s, is now over. I want to express my gratitude to Ed Ferman, who has put up with me for many a year, and who I hope, together with his wife, Audrey —who is very important to the enterprise — will continue to treat me and mine as a friend. And that's it, folks.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Madagascar Manifesto: Child of the Light, Gluckman & Guthridge, [St. Martin's, cloth, 389pp, $22.95]

THE PREMISE IS an intriguing one: An alternate history in which the Nazis actually carry out a plan that was once seriously bruited about — to establish a Jewish homeland on the island of Madagascar. Naturally, with the Nazis doing it it's more along the lines of a public relations effort, with the Jews actually brutalized prisoners in this new "homeland." But since this is volume one of a series, I imagine that later volumes will take us through some kind of effort at revolution.

A strong premise — but what kind of novel is it?

I had my fears when I read the first chapter of *Child of the Light*. It takes place in a Nazi concentration camp, with characters that we do not know and events so disturbing, so demoralizing, that it hardly makes us want to go on with the experience. Gluckman & Guthridge *wrote* the chapter well enough, but their choice of opening "hook" — for that is all that the first chapter is — is an unfortunate one. Especially because it's completely misleading.

The *real* story, which is launched in the second chapter, begins long before the concentration camps, and we do not get back to the camps for hundreds of pages. The story is of two German boys —good friends, though Solomon Freund is a Jew and Erich Weisser a gentile. Their parents are partners in a tobacco shop, but Mr. Weisser deeply resents his dependency on Jews. There is tension between the families from the start, and the boys are caught up in the sort of conflict that later makes possible the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany at large.

But there is far more to these boys than the matter of Jewishness, more than the fact that they both fall in love with Miriam Rathenau, a beautiful and talented Jewish girl who soon becomes famous as a performer. Gluckman & Guthridge,

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in the best Romantic fashion, have made Sol and Erich deeply contradictory men — Sol fundamentally good, but unsure of his own strength and courage; Erich filled with hate of his father and yet acting out his father's brutality, confident of his ability to master anyone, including his Nazi overlords. Miriam never quite descends to the level of mere "love interest," and other characters are also drawn effectively enough to engage our emotions.

Erich Weisser also has a psychic connection with dogs, which, besides its symbolic value, also gives him a skill that is valued by the Nazis, so that he is at least acquainted with some of the major figures in the Nazi Party. When leading Nazis come on stage, they are not made into mere monsters for us to loathe — we are permitted to see glimmers of how they seem to themselves. This makes their loathsomeness all the more credible.

The authors have researched the period well — or at least they fake it well enough to fool *me*. The hit songs, the social concerns, the attitudes are convincingly drawn; this world feels real. It also put the tune of the nightclub hit "Glow Worm" on my mind for weeks. (There was only one absurdity — a moment when a German character wonders why Americans called a *beef* sandwich a "*ham*burger." No German would give a moment's thought to such a question, since Germans would instantly see, not the word *ham*, but the name *Hamburg*, and correctly deduce the etymology of the sandwich. But a single howler in a historical novel is far better than average.)

In short, Gluckman & Guthridge have created characters, situations, and ideas powerful enough to draw us eagerly through even a work as long as this one promises to be. They did not need a distracting and misleading "hook" like that first chapter inside a concentration camp. It is especially misleading because so little of the book actually deals with concentration camp life, and having that chapter up front will certainly drive away some — perhaps many — readers who might otherwise have loved this novel. (I am tempted to speculate that Gluckman & Guthridge may have been pressured by editors into adding that mistaken first chapter, if only because I have had several experiences with editors who have "clever" ideas like that and won't rest until the author gives in and damages his own book. But of course it's just as possible that Gluckman & Guthridge misunderstood or mistrusted the appeal of their own book and either added or left that chapter at the front.)

Don't be put off, either by the

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fact that this book is the first volume of a series or by the fact that it begins as if it were going to be a deeply depressing journey into hell. Instead it is a vigorous and passionate Romance in an intriguing, well-imagined alternate history, and by the time the story dips into hell, we know the characters so well that we are willing to go there with them. This first volume ends with the landing on Madagascar; it will be fascinating to see where the story goes in later volumes, and whether Gluckman & Guthridge can maintain the high level of storytelling they have begun.

I doubt that this book will be seen as Important in the world of science fiction. Series are usually not taken as seriously as stand-alone novels, and this book breaks no new ground that demands that sf aficionados pay attention to it. Indeed, it is almost unfortunate that the book is going to be marketed as science fiction, since its natural audience is likely to come more from those who follow Michener, Howard Fast, or Irwin Shaw. But who cares whether the book is hailed as the salvation of science fiction? To those who read it it will be a powerful, perhaps unforgettable experience, and Gluckman & Guthridge establish themselves as writers capable of producing a first-rate popular novel.

* * *

Child of Faerie, Child of Earth, Josepha Sherman, (Walker, cloth, 159pp, $14.95)

Young adult novels can often be forgiven for cliché, because their audience has not read everything yet and therefore sees most old ideas as new. Still, I'm an adult reader and I *almost* gave up on *Child of Faerie, Child of Earth*, not because it begins badly, but because it begins so *familiarly*. Rezaila, the Queen of Faerie, has a half-human son who has fallen in love with a mortal girl — but one who belongs in Faerie because of the "first stirrings of Talent" in her. I must confess that Talent with a capital T is likely to stir my gag reflex, and the opening chapter was so arch with phrases like "Come, lad, what's so very urgent?" and "She's not of Faerie at all, Mother. She . . . is a human" that it reminded me of that humiliating moment in the movie *Dune* when poor Linda Hunt was required to say, portentously, "I . . . am the Kwisatz Hederach."

So I gave up and skipped to a place near the ending, just to see if it stayed that cliché ridden. And to my surprise, the story wasn't really about the Queen of Faerie or her boring son who falls in love with human girls by magically spying on them and then saying things like,

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"And win her, I shall." In fact, the novel is about the human girl, Graciosa, and when we finally get to *her* story, it's actually a delight. It's still familiar — the human who must pass various impossible tests and gets magical help to pass them; the human who doubts her own power but then, in the moment of crisis, is able to draw on them *just* in time — but Graciosa herself is quite engaging — and so is the writing of Josepha Sherman, when she gets away from high-toned fantasy-speak and writes plainly and simply.

And here's the thing: That which drove me crazy about the opening of the book is precisely the sort of thing that young readers are completely oblivious to. An eleven-year-old girl, reading that opening, isn't going to say, Oh, no, not *this* tone, not *this* kind of story again. She's going to get drawn in because it's all new to her. And so that naive reader will be able to receive quite a delightful and touching story.

Still (Card says grumpily) the book didn't *need* the triteness, the archness, the emptiness of the opening. Sherman *could* have started us with the point of view of the main character, and let us find out about Faerie and her magical lover when *she* did. The naive reader wouldn't have lost a thing by having a better-structured book. And we jaded old fantasy readers wouldn't be driven off with a stick when all we wanted was to read the good story that Josepha Sherman had to tell.

Del-Del, Victor Kelleher, (Walker, cloth 180pp, $17.95)

Del-Del is a young-adult "problem novel." Like an after-school special, it deals with a serious topic in a therapeutic way. But Kelleher is not trying to write a book in which loose ends are all tied up at the end of 47 minutes. Indeed, the farther you get into *Del-Del*, the more you become aware that Kelleher isn't going to give his readers *any* pat answers.

Beth, the narrator, is in a family still recovering from the death of the eldest child, Laura. It is her younger brother, Sam, however, who seems to suffer the most, as he becomes more and more violent and hard to live with. Beth comes to realize that he is — or thinks he is — possessed by an alien being, or perhaps a demon, named Del-Del, and she is forced to deal with this problem virtually alone. But all along, there is the distinct possibility that Del-Del is not an outsider at all, but rather something arising out of Sam's own soul, his own inner torment, so that victory will come, not by getting rid of Del-Del, but by helping Sam to contain or

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control or, perhaps, simply *release* his demon.

Kelleher's novel is simple and powerful, told in the first person by Beth, usually a difficult narrative strategy but here exactly right. It provides the frisson of a good story of dread without wallowing in gore or demonology. And you truly come to care about and believe in Beth and Sam and their family, so that the ending is at once emotional and real.

(Will you forgive me an aside about the mechanics of book-making? Both *Del-Del* and *Child of Faerie, Child of Earth* are from the same publisher, and both books use typefaces that are eccentric, call attention to themselves, and are annoying to read, even in books as short as these. It is tempting for book designers to look at a really interesting font and say, That one's pretty, let's use that! But those pretty fonts should be confined to titles and chapter heads and other "spot" uses. For the body of a book, stick with the clean, readable fonts that quietly do their job of helping our eyes go effortlessly from word to word.)

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Diane Mapes has lived all over the country. Currently she resides in one of the most beautiful sections of Washington State. Her fantasy has appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Pulphouse, *and* Interzone. *"The Personal Touch" marks Diane's first science fiction sale. The story isn't traditional sf. It focuses on the future of retail. "I've never worked in women's retail," Diane writes," Diane writes, "but I have clocked a lot of hours on the other side of the cash register. Snotty sweaters may be too far-fetched for some, but I've run into too many vindictive pairs of jeans to discount the possibility that readily."*

The Personal Touch

By Diane Mapes

I WAS REPROGRAMMING one of the mannequins for LoungeWare, when they brought the first of them in. The sweaters, I mean.

SmartSilk is what the honchos down at Hifashco called them, but they didn't look to me like the fashion equivalent of faster-than-light travel, the way Maggie'd been saying for the past month and a half. They just looked like sweaters. Until they started to glow. And climb out of that box.

"SmartSilk Test Line, Shipment 280, Unit 4 here," said a sleek black number in a perfectly modulated voice. Rhinestones glittered and swirled on its chest, like constellations on speed. "I'd like to speak with Hifashco Store Manager Margaret Eckert. Is she available for consultation?"

"I'm right here," Maggie said, squeezing my arm as a few more sweaters lifted out of the crate and suspended themselves in midair, striking overly dramatic poses like a roomful of auditioning Lady Macbeths. I wondered if

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there were really billions of self-generated gnatwings inside them like the newsnet had said, or if they were just using those skyhooks Gram used to say cluttered my upstairs bedroom.

"Oh Gloria, aren't they pretty?" Maggie gushed. Maggie was always gushing; sometimes I wondered if she was related to the vintage faucet the decorators had installed in the back room.

"Yeah, they're just peachy," I said, watching a wrinkled green turtleneck shake itself out and head for a bank of mirrors. It passed the till, then paused as it found its reflection in the front of the dressing rooms. It shimmered for a moment — the way Gram does when she first turns on —then suddenly it wasn't green or wrinkled anymore. It was sky blue with little zeppelins floating across it. And it had breasts.

"Hello, Margaret Eckert," the sleek black number was saying to Maggie. "I trust your health is good." I turned from the zeppelins back to Galaxy Express. The rhinestones had coalesced into the face of a woman, but not like any face I'd ever seen: tiny hangers for lips, needle-and-thread eyes, a scissors nose. A comlink chip winked at me from its neckline, a gold spider weaving a web of double *S*'s on a dull silver square. The square had the look of solid platinum; the whole operation, of big-time promotion. Reeked of it, in fact, bad as the Organicwear that had composted in the back room. I knew right then that this SmartSilk stuff took itself — and retail merchandising — far too seriously.

"Oh yes," Maggie giggled. "My health is quite good." Maggie was about ready to pee her pants, talking to a sweater like that, especially one as hyped as this one was. "The first of their kind," the Hifashco newsnet had said. "They walk; they talk; they literally sell themselves." Me, I'd just as soon they stayed dumb, stayed on hangers, and let me provide the sales pitch and the breasts.

"I'm pleased to hear that you are well, Margaret Eckert," Unit 4 said. "I will enter your response immediately." Poor Maggie, I thought; there goes her sick leave for the next six months. Unit 4 paused for a moment as if meditating, then it pursed its lips and moved away from the three-way mirror.

I figured the mirror's metal backing had screwed up its transmission. The mirror's front didn't do that much for me either, or for anyone who wasn't wearing Hifashco beautification sensors in their clothes. Damn warping currents. The store was lousy with them.

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"Preliminaries aside, I've been instructed to train you in the proper care and handling of SmartSilk Test Line, Shipment 280, referred to henceforth as Personal Touch sweaters," Unit 4 rattled off, turning back to us. "Please pay close attention. I will give this information only once." Courtesies were apparently aside, too; it was all business now.

Maggie and I pulled up a couple of stools, with the other sweaters floating around us like a swarm of huge, cotton-blend butterflies. I'd heard this was the procedure — an in-house sweater seminar, courtesy of Monica Mohair. Apparently, these new babies were sensitive to such things as water, heat, and human error, and Hifashco wanted to make sure there was as little of the latter as possible. Already, a girl in a Phoenix outlet had been fired for pulling a stray thread and putting a four-thousand-dollar sweater out of commission.

"Personal Touch sweaters are the latest innovation in spider-silk nanotechnology, developed to respond perfectly to their owner's taste in fashion, fit, and comfort," Unit 4 purred. "They're self-cleaning, self-caring, and their unique design enables them to key into their owner's DNA structure, accessing information on color, compatability, comf —"

"Look," I said, my fingers starting to twitch. I could have used a cigarette — except, they'd been outlawed fifteen years ago, and, on my salary, I couldn't afford membership in a SmokeEasy. "I know you can go from a chartreuse tank top to a baby-blue blouse at the drop of a hat — not to mention walk, talk, and analyze gum all at the same time — but what is it *we* do?"

A ripple of amusement crossed the face on the front of the sweater, then was gone.

"You must be Assistant Manager Gloria Gilbert," the sweater said in a saccharine tone, about as sweet and genuine as the packets of Newsugar they gave you at the Foodwheel. "How pleasant to see you, Miss Gilbert. I've heard so much about you and your skills at handling the odd bit of paper currency. I trust your health is good?"

Either the sweater wasn't programmed for much more than polite conversation, or it was trying to evade my question — and I had a sneaky hunch it wasn't the former. These sweaters weren't brain-dead like the store's mannequins, at least not *this* sweater; it had smarts woven into it like my regular old clothes had pilled cotton and coffee stains. I sensed Hifashco's AI behind that sultry mohair facade. I didn't think much of

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Hifashco's AI, and I had a feeling it felt the same way about me.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," I said, grabbing Unit 4's sleeve and talking into it like it was an old-style microphone. "If the sweaters do everything from knitting their own underwear to telling their owners when they have to go to the bathroom, what do *we* do?"

"Don't be a sill, Gloria," Maggie said nervously. "Why, somebody's got to *sell* the darn things, don't they?"

Unit 4 — the darn thing — was silent just a little too long for my taste.

"Of course, someone will have to handle the sales for the Personal Touch line," the sweater finally said, gently but firmly extracting its sleeve from my hand. "Margaret Eckert will remain on as Hifashco store manager."

"See, I told you there was nothing to worry about," Maggie gushed. "*We'll* sell the sweaters, just like always."

"Begging your pardon, Margaret Eckert," Unit 4 said. "But I am fully capable of handling sales as well as the inventory, ordering, and security for this outlet."

"But if *you're* going to do all that, what's Gloria going to do?" Maggie, bless her empty little head, asked.

Again the silence. Then Unit 4's color wavered, deepened to a rich blood red. The collar stretched, became a hood. Executioner's? I wondered. The face disappeared, replaced by a mesh of undulating gold threads. I watched them warp and spin on the chest of the sweater until I could feel myself grow suddenly tired, relaxed.

"Hifashco regrets that the successful development of the Personal Touch line has required the termination of some of its valued employees," the sweater said, its tones soothing, round and golden as the dance of the threads. There was something amid the dancing threads, something a deeper red and stunningly graceful. "Hifashco will, of course, provide the traditional two weeks' severance pay as well as their good wishes for those employees' continued success elsewhere." I was getting fired, a part of me realized. Fired after ten long years, with only two weeks' pay, but somehow I didn't care. I watched the glowing golden threads, and the beautiful scarlet object deep within. It was a spider, I saw now. A beautiful, weaving spider. The SmartSilk logo.

SmartSilk. Too smart. I shook my head and stood up. Unit 4 assumed its black-mohair-and-spinning-silver-dust-mote scheme, along with a

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smirk — don't ask me how; it didn't have a mouth. I went back to the counter to get my purse.

"Anyone for doubles?" asked a mannequin in a sheer nightie as I passed by. "Court's free!" It was Clarissa, on the blink again.

I fiddled with the panel recessed in the poor thing's left cheek, knowing full well her days were numbered, just like mine. Hifashco didn't go for the obsolete — unless, of course, they could use it for effect, like the antique Maytag washer and dryer in the no-wash-jeans display.

Finishing my programming, I gave her a pat on the access panel, wishing the bewildered look on her face didn't feel quite so familiar.

Gram was off when I got home, but I usually didn't leave her on during the day. Sure, she was only a compilation of memories — an amalgamation of old vids, snapshots, and faded messages on Christmas cards — but I figured she still got lonely.

"I'm home, Gram," I said, keying in her code sequence. Most people went with birth dates or names or even price tags to call up their holos, but not me. I went with a smell, her smell. Lilacs.

"Well, Gloria. How nice to see you. I hope your day went well." Gram sort of gelled in a corner of the living room. She was sitting in her chair, an old magazine on her lap. I could barely make out the title — *Cosmopolitan*. She looked about seventy, the same age as when I came to live with her after the Disney World shuttle crash took everybody else, but it was hard to tell her age, really. Her hologram always came in weak. Through her soft, shimmering face, I could see the flowered print of the curtains behind her, the antique doily draped across the back of the chair, the T/Vid. I could have gotten the Living Image model, where the resolution is so good, "You'll Swear the Funeral Was Just a Bad Dream" — but I didn't have the money, and I wanted to know she wasn't real anyway. Days like today, I needed to know that.

"Oh, it wasn't too bad," I said, heading into the kitchen for a drink. I didn't want to worry her, not just yet. I didn't want to think about getting fired, either. "I've certainly had better. You want anything?" That was just a courtesy; I knew holograms couldn't drink, any more than they could give you a well-needed hug. ("No meals, no mess. The companionship of a relative — and nothing else!" the HoloFam promotional material had said.)

"No, thank you, dear. Go on and help yourself. I'm fine."

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I did. There were a couple beers in the fridge; I got one and a bag of chips and headed back into the living room. Gram was still in her chair; she had that absorbed look she always got when she was reading something about sex or politics.

"We got those new sweaters in today," I said, pulling open the bag. The sack went into its usual spiel about calories and carbohydrates, but I ignored it and crunched away. Some chips spilled onto the rug; I ground them in with my shoe. Let the damn self-cleaning fibers take care of the mess, I thought. "You know the ones I was telling you about. The SmartSilk line."

"Yes, dear," Gram said, and turned a page. I could tell she was only half-listening. Must have been the then-new Judith Krantz excerpt. Sex *and* politics, even better.

"Anyway, they're really something, Gram. They can fit any size customer, adjust to any color or style. They give the customer anything they want, whether it's huge biceps or a six-inch waist. They're fresh out of the lab. 'The latest in spider-silk nanotechnology.'" My voice came out just like Unit 4's. I opened my beer, ignoring the bottle as it rattled off the health and punitive risks, and took a long pull, trying to wash away the bad taste the thought of that overeducated piece of yarn had left in my mouth.

"I sing the sweater electric?" Gram said, smiling. Her eyes were still on the page. Maybe it was Andrew Greeley. Sex, politics, *and* religion. Triple whammy.

"Sort of," I said. "Except, they call themselves Personal Touch sweaters. Not exactly the same stuff they had at B. Altman and Company."

Gram looked up at that. "I'll have you know you couldn't find better or more varied merchandise anywhere in the country than at B. Altman's. And at Altman's, it was all under one roof, not scattered across the country in a bunch of oversized malls."

Gram had always gotten huffy whenever she thought Altman's was being attacked, and her hologram was no different. She'd worked at Altman's for more than twenty-five years, up until they'd gone under back in the nineties. Gram had definite ideas about women's retail and what it was all about — ideas that I had picked up over the course of my years with her. I knew how to help a customer find just the right fit, how to handle a stubborn pleat or sew a button on to stay. Unfortunately, all of

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those talents were outmoded these days.

"I'm not knocking Altman's, Gram," I said, grinding more chips into the rug. "It's just that these sweaters are really different. They're like having a hundred different colors and sizes rolled into one piece of cloth. And having it be able to decide when you need a change of style, too, and hang itself up when it needs hanging, and clean itself up if it gets dirty." I thought of that sweater parading around the store with the outlines of two perfect breasts. "They can pretty much do everything."

"Hmph," Gram said. "Seems like the only thing these sweaters do is promote bad habits. Change themselves. Wash themselves. What's the matter with people? Are they afraid to think anymore? Are they afraid to get a little Woolite on their hands?"

I stared down at my beer. The moose on the label seemed to stare back. "Recycle me," it whispered.

"I don't know what's wrong with them, Gram," I said. "I guess they just can make that stuff, so they do it."

"Kids playing with a new toy," Gram said, indignantly slapping another page aside. "No regard for the people they're bulldozing under in the process. Personal Touch sweaters, my eye. They don't even know the meaning of the word. Now, Altman's, they knew about the personal touch. Did I ever tell you that B. Altman's ran a fully staffed medical department for employees and their families?"

I nodded.

"And that there was a shoeshine salon? And a tailoring department? A millinery? Even a rare-books division?"

"Yes, Gram," I said. "You've told me."

We were both silent after that. Me, thinking about my old job; and Gram, no doubt, doing much the same. Before she died, she never said much about Altman's closing down, but I could always tell it hurt her. And not just because she was out of a job. There was something more than that that had been sacrificed there.

After a while, I got up and paced around the living room. There was nothing on the T/V; I didn't feel like watching any vids. I toyed with some of Gram's old things that I'd kept around after she died — a clunky old Selectric typewriter, some actual glass beer bottles, a couple of printed and bound magazines. I picked up one — *Vogue* — and riffled through it. It was nice for a change to look at ads that didn't notice you, to read the type

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instead of having the page whisper it up at you. Things were different back in Gram's days, more sedate. No neon dresses, no self-penetrating lipstick and hair color. And certainly, no walking, talking sweaters.

"Are you all right, dear?" Gram asked behind me. I turned around. She was watching me, the magazine open on her lap. There was a stray curl hanging down over her forehead — robin's-egg blue, I'd always thought it — and a hankie peeking out from the right sleeve of her suit. I had that very same hankie tucked away in a drawer, along with the pictures of her and my parents, my little sister, Frieda — all gone now. Part of me knew that this Gram was just a program, that she didn't really exist, any more than the real Gram existed. That her flesh was only an enhanced memory, an illusion perpetrated on and by myself, and if I were to run to her now and bury my face in the soft black wool that stretched across her shoulder, my face would find only the nubby surface of my living room chair. No smell of lilacs, no soothing hand to pat my back and tell me everything would be all right. But another part of me fought that knowledge. Fought it hard.

I smiled at Gram, and she smiled back. Like the brochure had said —the companionship of a relative, and nothing else.

"I'm just a little tired, I guess," I said, and slowly made my way for the control panel."I think I might take a nap before dinner." I never could tell her when I was going to turn her off.

OVERNIGHT THE word got out.

People crowded in front of the store — mostly women, mostly young, mostly rich, by the looks of their expensive designer clothes, their skillfully engineered bodies, and the solid-platinum Hifashco cards clutched in their sweaty little palms.

"Are they really five thousand dollars apiece?" asked a girl in silver jodhpurs and her mother's shoes. "Do they really talk?" asked an older man; he did look a little lonely.

I inched my way through the crowd and slipped into the store. Nothing moved inside — nothing human, at least. The SmartSilk sweaters writhed and undulated in the front display window, enticing the passersby like the dollar stripvids that played along Mallwood's First Avenue.

"Maggie?" I called, wandering toward the back of the store. The till was silent; the store's lights, all off. The sweaters on the racks stayed motionless, like good sweaters should.

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"Maggie? Are you back here?" I paused at the door to the back room, letting my eyes adjust to the dark. There were only shadows back here, and deeper shadows where Maggie and I had systematically stacked the store's old displays and accoutrements. I heard a rustle amid the shadows, like the rattle of a snake, and my mouth grew dry. It sounded like tissue paper rustling in the breeze — except, there wasn't a breeze. And there probably wasn't any tissue paper, either. There was only perfect climate control and gift boxes that manufactured their own synthetic lining.

The dry rasp came again, and my heart hammered in my chest. That's when I felt a touch on my shoulder. Looking down, I saw a sleeve, black and sleek. No hand, just a sleeve, the touch of Death itself.

"Good morning, Assistant Manager Gloria Gilbert," Unit 4 said as I dove into a pile of jeans. "I trust you slept well?"

"Fine," I muttered, pulling myself out of the denim. The sweater floated in front of me, a thin smile stitched across its needle-and-thread face. I wanted to take that smile and rip it out thread by thread, despite my determination to give Hifashco one more shot. My hand stopped in mid-air, then reached down and flicked a piece of lint from the front of my blouse. "I slept wonderfully, Unit 4. Is Maggie in yet? We open in ten minutes."

"I regret to report that Store Manager Margaret Eckert is not in yet," Unit 4 said. It was starting to do its magic light show again, a circus this time. Old-time Ferris wheel, carousel of galloping horses, a wheel of fortune. "And the store is scheduled to open in exactly seven minutes, thirty-six seconds."

I edged by it, almost smelling the buttered popcorn. "Seven minutes, thirty-six seconds, huh? I guess I was off."

"You cannot help yourself," Unit 4 said, cruising by at a low altitude. The circus motif was gone now, replaced by a sleek gray scramjet, gliding across a starry landscape. There were epaulets on the shoulders of its stiffly starched blue shirt, a general's four stars at the neck. "You are human, and humans have a large capacity for error."

I bit my lip to keep quiet. Being nice to this wad of integrated inseams was going to be tougher than I had thought.

There was a clamor at the windows, and I looked up to see Unit 4 keying open the front door. "Hey, wait a minute," I called. "We can't open without Maggie. There must be fifty people out there."

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"It is now exactly ten o'clock," Unit 4 purred, keying open the door. "And the store must open on time."

Be helpful, I recited. You can catch more flies with honey. "Well, I suppose I can handle it myself," I said weakly.

"You won't have to handle anything, *Assistant* Manager Gloria Gilbert," Unit 4 answered. However it did it, the smirk was back, even without the face. "As I've already told you, the sweaters will sell themselves."

I hated to admit it, but Unit 4 was right. As the people surged into the store, grabbing the SmartSilk sweaters out of the window, off the walls, out from under the counter, Unit 4 went into its spiel, and the sweaters began to shimmer and shake and flow from one design to the next, like bits of colored glass within a huge kaleidoscope. One minute a paisley blouse, the next a gold lamé tube top. A flat-chested redhead tried one on and suddenly became buxom. An overweight blonde's stomach shrank to nothing. Figures were tucked and toned and tidied. Nipples hardened on cue; necklines raised and lowered like the city's reservoirs after a scheduled rain. And through it all, the women oohed and aahed, clapped and exclaimed, then tossed out their Hifashco charge cards so fast that for a moment I swore I was seven years old again and playing Slapjack with my little sister, Frieda.

Ironically, even with the brisk business, I couldn't find a single chance to show Unit 4 I was still worth my salt as an employee. It cut me off at every turn — pointing out the price tags, reciting care instructions, slipping behind the till to record sales. It even escorted customers back to the dressing rooms and waited outside while they tried on the clothes. About the only thing it wouldn't do was go in and dress them itself, but I knew that was only because once inside the booths, the mirrors' metal backing cut it off from Hifashco's AI net.

Maggie finally dragged in about a quarter past eleven. She looked about like my reflection in the store's doctored mirrors: pale, glassy-eyed, a little green around the gills. I could tell she'd been out the night before, drinking, and probably smoking as well. There was a tarriness to her clothes and hair, a hazy lethargy that clung to her like the city's gnatbots around a broken traffic light.

"You are one hour, twenty-two minutes late for work, Manager Margaret Eckert," Unit 4 said, swooping in on her the minute its sensors picked

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her up. I was keying in my first sale of the day, pretending to listen to a woman enthuse about how her new Personal Touch sweater perfectly matched her new eyes. I almost groaned when I heard Maggie answer.

"I had the flu," she said, throwing her purse under the counter and winking up at me. "Sorry I'm late," she whispered. "Gary came over last night with passes to Smokey's." I shook my head, but it was too late; Unit 4 was already there.

"My sensors detect no elevation in temperature, Margaret Eckert," it said, hovering at her elbow. "Nor any trace of influenza virus within your cell structure. The information you have given me is incorrect. Would you like to reconsider your initial statement?"

"Huh?" Maggie said. Comprehension always dawned on Maggie about as slowly as unemployment benefits being cleared for deposit.

Things didn't get much better after that.

I tried to prove my worth; I really did. No one in the history of women's retail rearranged as many displays, dressed as many mannequins, spouted as many slogans, or sucked up to as many customers as I did that week.

But Hifashco didn't care.

They weren't interested in good workers. They weren't interested in workers at all — good, bad, or indifferent. People, and especially salespeople, had become obsolete in their collective corporate mind, and there was nothing I could do about it. Not even Gram could think of any ideas.

"I don't know what to tell you," she said when I confessed my predicament. "When Altman's closed down, I just took an early retirement. My pension wasn't much, but it was enough to keep us pretty comfortable. I don't suppose you've put away any savings?"

I shook my head. Gram had been my savings.

"Well, I suppose you could always get another job in retail," Gram said wistfully. I didn't have the heart to tell her that once SmartSilk hit the marketplace, there wouldn't *be* any more retail. Not even the pared-down variety that existed now.

"I don't know, Gram," I said, staring at the moose on my bottle. "Fewer calories," it whispered to me. "No natural yeasts." "I'm getting kind of tired of retail. Maybe I'll go back to school or something. Join the Air Force. Learn to weld."

"Don't be ridiculous," Gram said. She got out of her chair and started

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pacing back and forth in the living room. It usually gave me the creeps when she did that, but tonight I just drank my beer and watched the room pass through her.

"There's got to be something you can do for that company," she said after a while. "You can't tell me there's no more need for someone who cares about style, about finesse. Who cares about the little personal touches. Who's going to mend those fancy new sweaters when they get a snag?"

"They don't get snags, Gram," I said. "They're made of spider-silk threads that mend themselves."

"And what about tailoring?" Gram said, as if she hadn't heard me. "And cleaning? And ironing? There's not a blouse that's been made that couldn't use a little pressing now and then."

I took a sip of my beer and thought about that. After a while a nasty smile spread across my face.

I CALLED MAGGIE sometime around midnight and asked her to meet me at the store an hour early the next day.

"I want to get in there early in case there's been any trouble with those new sweaters," I said, on the off chance Hifashco's AI should be listening. "I think some of them have been acting up lately. Knocking things over, turning machines on. I found that old dryer plugged in and running yesterday."

"I figured they'd run into something eventually, flying around like that," Maggie said, going along with me. I had a feeling Maggie was finally starting to figure a few things out.

She was waiting for me in the parking lot at 7:30 with a sack full of FunBuns — cinnamon dog heads this time — and a couple of mugs of her own specially brewed coffee, the good stuff that you couldn't find in the supermarkets anymore. I took a mug with a nod of thanks, and we headed for the mall entrance.

"You two are early this morning," Unit 4 said, scuttling out of the back room as I shut the front door behind us. "The store is not scheduled to open until ten. Have you perhaps misset your clocks?"

"Our clocks are fine," I said, taking a sip of my coffee. "But I think yours could use a little cleaning."

Unit 4 seemed to bristle. A face appeared on its chest, this time made

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of thousands of tiny spiders. "As you should be well aware of by now, Gloria Gilbert," it said, its eyes pulsing with hundreds of skittering legs, "SmartSilk requires no cleaning of any kind whatsoever."

"Oh yeah?" I said, sauntering toward the dressing rooms at the back of the store. "Then what's that big stain on your left shoulder?"

Unit 4 shuddered; the spiders on its chest sprouted little red hourglasses. "SmartSilk is incapable of staining," it hissed, following me. It looked like it wanted to pounce.

"Is that so?" I asked, stopping before the open door of dressing room six. "Well, if SmartSilk doesn't stain. . . ." I pointed at its left eye. All right, I jabbed it *in* the left eye. "Then *what* exactly is *that*!"

Unit 4 paused for a moment, then started to shimmer, going into its self-cleaning routine. It was all I needed. I gathered my strength and shoved it into the dressing room, like Gram had said she'd once had to do to an overly insistent shoe salesman. Luckily, Unit 4 had no foot to lodge in the dressing room door. Slamming the door tight, I leaned against it and let out a deep breath.

"Maggie," I called. "Could you bring me the key to the dressing room?" Maggie stumbled over — she never had been a morning person — and handed me the card.

I locked the door and tucked it into my pocket, ignoring the muffled thumping from inside the room. "Just stand here," I told her. "Don't move. Don't open it. Just lean."

The first part of my plan had worked beautifully — Unit 4 was caught in our dressing room's makeshift Faraday cage. I slipped into the back room, dug the iron out of the corner, and filled the sink full of scalding-hot water. It was time for Part Two.

It was all much easier than I had thought it would be. The sweaters didn't even fight back — not when I scooped them out of the front window or dumped them into the hot water full of Gram's Woolite suds, not even when I wrung them out or spun them in the old electric dryer Hifashco had thoughtfully provided for the jeans display. They hardly even protested when I draped their damp, limp bodies over the ironing board and had at them with Gram's Niagara speed starch and a steaming-hot iron. They flailed around a bit, sure. One turned a decidedly gray shade of green and looked like it was coughing up some yarn, but, for the most part, they

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were quite cooperative. I figured Unit 4 was the only real stinker in the bunch.

About 9:30, I brought the sweaters out of the back room and began tossing them about here and there. Most of them sort of hobbled toward the front display window, where they put on a shadow of their former show. One ran headlong into a wall and slid down it like a drunken bird. I shook Maggie a little to wake her up, then turned on the lights and the till and sent her up to the front counter.

"Don't open up until I join you," I said, pulling out of my purse the needle and thread that I'd bought the night before. "I should be only a few minutes." I threaded a good four yards worth of silk through the eye, then hacked at it with some scissors till it cut. They weren't kidding when they said that industrial-strength spider silk was tough.

My hand on the knob, I closed my eyes and silently mouthed a prayer. This one's for you, Gram, I thought, and unlocked the dressing room door.

It was crouched in a corner as if waiting for me, although I knew that without the AI to back it up, Unit 4 was just as stupid as the rest of its friends. It was jet black with only a few sprinkles of swirling color on its chest.

"You're looking a little plain today, Unit 4," I said, pricking its sleeve with my needle. I pulled the bright white thread through, quickly knotting it, and took a few more stitches, ending up near its comlink chip. "I thought I'd give you a little bit of my special embroidery to cheer you up. I learned it from my grandmother. She was in women's retail, too."

Unit 4 seemed to notice what I was doing, and pulled away. Its sleeve immediately clamped tight to its chest.

I pulled the thread tighter and took a few more stitches. Down the left sleeve, over the front of its chest, along the soft ridges at its waist, back up the right. Unit 4 pulled away again and slowly began to crumple into a ball. I looped the thread around it a few times, basting quick stitches at the neckline, down a sleeve, here and there for support. I had only about a yard left.

"My, that looks much better," I said, standing back to admire my handiwork. Unit 4 began to shimmer. A flap of material spread out from either side of the threads about its waist, then hung limp, unable to mesh. Its sleeve elongated and batted at the threads, as if trying to break them, then

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stopped. The sweater shimmered again and pulled away. The threads around it grew tighter.

"Oh, you don't want to do that," I said, looping the rest of the thread around the clothes hook hanging from the center of the dressing room. I tied a quick slipknot and reached for the doorknob. Unit 4 hung from the ceiling like a spider trapped within its own silk. "You'll ruin the whole design."

At 10:00, we opened.

As usual, a mob of women poured in from the mall midway. As usual, the sweaters began writhing about for them — colors shifting, sleeves shrinking, collars expanding, polka dots propagating.

"How much for this one?" A woman shoved a peach-colored SmartSilk sweatshirt under my nose.

"They're all the same price," I said. I quoted her the figure.

"You've got to be kidding!" she screamed. "It's only a sweatshirt!"

"It's a sweatshirt now," I said. "But try it on; let it hook into your genes. It'll become anything you want. Strapless bra, down parka, Santa Claus suit. It knows your colors and your capabilities better than you. Try it on and see what I mean; the dressing rooms are right back there. Uh, don't use the last one, number six. A girl just got sick in there."

The woman blanched, but trotted off toward the dressing rooms. Other people asked questions, bought scarves, socks, jeans, hose. One girl came up and complained that the SmartSilk sweater she'd tried on had pinched her in the butt. Another brought one to the front with what looked like moth holes eaten all the way through it. "What am I supposed to do with *this*?" she demanded. "I thought you people sold better quality merchandise!"

I calmed her down, gleefully quoting Hifashco's consumer number. At 11:30, I was starting to get a little nervous. Nothing much had happened. That's when I heard the scream. It was the lady with the peach sweatshirt in dressing room one.

"It's got me," she shrieked. "Help, somebody! It's got me —" Her screams were cut off, replaced by a muffled choking. I hurried to the back and jerked open the door. The rest of the store crowded behind me.

The peach sweatshirt had gone berserk. Its collar had shrunk to the size of a sleeve hole and was slowly strangling her. The sleeves had tripled

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in length and were flashing with neon arrows and dollar signs. As I watched, they lifted and slowly began to wrap around the sweater's — and the woman's — torso, again and again, like a two-headed pink python. Buttons appeared from nowhere, dropped off, and were replaced by others. Big pockets swallowed smaller pockets. Faces appeared and disappeared; dogs wagged their tails; a knight on horseback jousted with a dragon along the ribbing at the sweater's waist. An airplane zipped along a side seam, then crashed into an armpit.

"Mummm mm mmm," the woman said, her eyes bulging above where the sweater had her. What little I could see of her face was beet red.

"Oh shit," I heard Maggie say behind me. "That thing's going to kill her."

"Get me some scissors," I said over my shoulder. "The sharpest you can find. We'll have to cut her out of it." People gawked and whispered behind me. "My friend just bought one. I'd better tell her about this." "Do you think she'll die? Boy, they're in for a lawsuit if she does." "Hey, somebody call the newsnet; they've got to get this." After a few seconds, Maggie slipped the scissors into my hand.

"I'll have you cut out of there in a minute, ma'am," I said, starting to hack away at the neckline. Luckily, the Woolite seemed to have softened the thread's resistance as well as its brains. The woman mumbled something I couldn't understand, and then fainted.

I went to town with the scissors. After that, it started to get really crazy. A little while later, I called Hifashco, and, shortly before their representative arrived, I opened the door to dressing room six.

I went home early that day. The man from Hifashco said I more than deserved some time off after the day I'd put in. He was quite apologetic about the whole affair. They were, after all, only a test shipment. No one expected them not to have a *few* bugs. He was most apologetic about the failure of Unit 4; the built-in comlink chip was supposed to keep Hifashco apprised of any malfunctions at the stores.

He allowed that the breakdown in communication might have stemmed from a little glitch they'd discovered within their AI. I allowed that the little glitch might have been responsible for Unit 4 wrapping itself up in its own silk like it had. I hadn't counted on scoring a direct hit back to the home office with my creative stitchery, but I should have known the

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Al was vain enough to go crazy rather than accept the fact that it had been bested. Not to mention basted.

I knew that in a week or a month — or maybe, if I were lucky, six months — Hifashco would figure out what had really happened. But by then I'd be long gone. Florida was supposed to be nice this time of year. I'd missed it the last time, when my family had flown down for the big shuttle ride. I'd had the flu then, had to stay with Gram. I told them it was O.K., to go on without me. My sister, Frieda, had been looking forward to it for months. All of them had, really. My cousin was delighted to take my seat on the plane. I thought about that sometimes.

I turned Gram on when I came in, and went into my bedroom to pack. She came by just as I was sealing up my suitcase.

"Are you going somewhere, dear?" she asked, leaning against the door. I could see the bathroom through her, although not as clearly, it seemed, as I always had before. Maybe she was solidifying over time; I knew she seemed more real to me each day. That was part of the reason I was leaving, too. Gram wasn't real; Gram was dead. Just like the retail business. This brief reprieve was only an illusion like her, nothing more. I had bought a little time, but that was all.

"Yes, I'm going somewhere," I said, shutting my suitcase.

"Did you find a position elsewhere?" Gram asked, sitting down on the bed. "Perhaps with Saks? Or the May Company?"

"I think I'm going to try something different for a while, Gram," I said, sitting down beside her. Her hand was resting on my bedspread. It was her bedspread, really. Pink chenille. I could see the bare spots underneath her where I had absently picked out threads as a child, listening to her stories about B. Altman's.

I moved my hand next to her hand, placing mine carefully beside hers. If I kept it there, without touching — without intruding on the hologram's image — it almost seemed as though she were real. That any moment she might reach over and enclose my hand in hers like a bird protecting its young with a soft, feathered wing.

"Well, you'll do fine no matter what line of work you go into," she said, cocking her head. There was that curl again springing down in front of her eyes; she never had been able to subdue it even while she had been alive.

"Oh, I know, Gram," I said, leaning closer. I could almost smell the lilacs. I wondered if there were lilacs in Florida.

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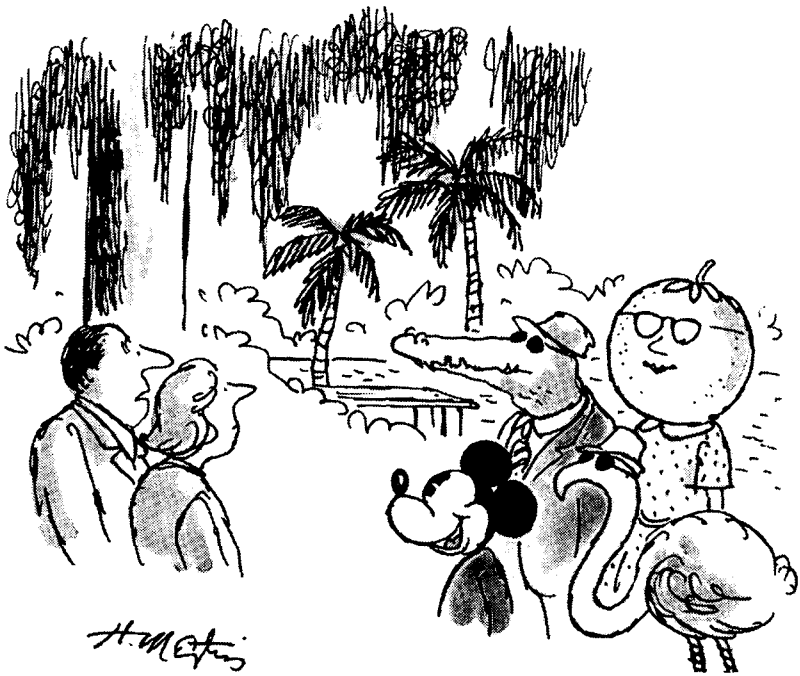
"Someone like you, someone who cares about the little things, the little touches. You'll go far. You'll see."

I glanced over at my suitcase. I was booked on the midnight flight to Orlando. "It's time to go someplace," I said, and got up. My coat was on the back of the chair, black wool with a plain silk lining, like the suit Gram always wore. I'd gotten it at a vintage-clothing store about twenty miles outside of Mallwood. The woman who worked there said there were other stores like it popping up all over the country. I wondered if there was one in Orlando. And if they might need some help, someone who knew how to handle a stubborn pleat, who could sew a button on to stay.

"Good-bye, Gloria," Gram said, looking up at me from the bed. I could tell she knew I wouldn't be back. I could tell she knew that when I turned her off this time, it would be for good.

"Good-bye, Gram," I said, and reached out to her shoulder. Her hand lifted from the bedspread and enclosed mine, soft and feathery as the wing of a bird. A soft touch, a personal touch. "I'll see you, O.K.?"



"I usually can't tell where people are from but Floridians look like Florida."

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

IMAGINING THE REAL

Lately I've asked a wide number of my scientist friends two questions: (a) did you ever read science fiction; (b) what did you like?

These questions assume that working scientists don't read much fiction any more, which turns out to be true for the majority. Their answers were remarkably similar, whether I asked physicists, chemists, biologists or even engineers. Well over half did read sf, most haven't the time now, but they preferred 'hard' science fiction when they did indulge.

None of this surprised me, but it does raise further questions about how this particular brand of sf relates to scientists themselves. We all know that a small but rather determined band of sf authors actually are scientists, and they tend to write the 'hard' stuff. Is it obvious that they should?

As one who does, it's a personal point, and I'm going to worry it a bit here, without unmasking all the mysteries.

By 'hard science fiction' (sf) I mean that which highly prizes fidelity to the physical facts of the universe, while building upon them to realize new fictional worlds. It sticks to the facts — unless some crucial new experiment or discovery changes those — but can play fast and loose with theory as it likes. It's important that any new scientific theory must explain the facts we already know, though it can twist your head aroundto do the job. Einstein's explanation of gravity as warped space-time doesn't sound like Newton's forces acting at a distance — but they explain the same elliptical orbits and falling apples, with Einstein winning in the fifth decimal place.

Our century has been a playground for physics, which with electronics, the atom and the rocket has remade the world. Because physics makes the most precise predictions,

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hard sf often uses it to anchor speculations. Astronomy provides the largest possible landscape for adventures, often action-filled, but also for cosmic perspectives, a hallmark. Maybe some of all this authority will rub off.

Science fiction arose in a time affected by science's unsettling revelations about ourselves, about our position in the natural order—and by relentless technology, science's burly handmaiden. Sf has tried to grapple with ideas which disturb our sense of being at home in the world. While botany, or human anatomy, or zoology do not really separate us from our common world, physics, chemistry and especially astronomy certainly do.

This alienation may be why these latter sciences turn up so much in hard sf, as it struggles with the emotions they kindle. Advances in genetics shall soon lead to bioengineering, effectively alienating us from our bodies, making us see ourselves and nature even more as machines—so hard sf has lately drawn this area into its province. Many stories expend a lot of effort trying to offset or reconcile with these poisoned gifts.

Robert Frost remarked that free verse was like playing tennis with the net down. At first maybe a netless game seems fresh, exciting—but soon nobody wants to watch you play. Hard sf plays with the net of scientific fact up and strung as tight as the story allows.

H.G. Wells admonished writers to make one assumption, as fantastic as we like, and then explore it remorselessly. A world of infinite possibilities is boring because there can be no suspense. If you write a sonnet with, say, 17 lines, you haven't written a good or bad one—you haven't written a sonnet at all.

The same way the iron rules of the sonnet can force excellence within a narrow frame, paying attention to scientific accuracy can force coherence on fiction. This aesthetic is central to hard sf, and why scientists like it.

Scientists like the joy of discovery, which means uncovering an unsuspected aspect of the world, usually implicit in what you knew before. Detective stories hold similar pleasures in a smaller compass. There is a particularly hard-sf flavor to this delight, though, suggested by a passage from Clement's *Mission of Gravity:*

"Dondragmer spent much of the time on the downstream trip examining the [differential] hoist. He already knew its principles of construction well enough to have made one without help; but he could not quite figure out just why it worked. Several Earthmen watched him with amusement, but none was discour-

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teous enough to show the fact—and none dreamed of spoiling the Mesklinite's chance of solving the problem himself."

Problems as a source of pleasure do not have to be explained to the reader.

Mission of Gravity's detailed descriptions of a high-gravity planet and its insectlike natives was meticulous and well-argued. This novel may mark the true beginning of hard sf as a recognized subgenre, though the term itself doesn't seem to have come into use until the middle 1960s, perhaps in reaction to the New Wave literary movement. (Though the New Wave was important in opening the field to wider influences, its greatest effect may have been to make hard sf into a recognized opposite.) Clement's bizarre but scientifically plausible world is a raw setting in which the protagonists struggle upward against great weight, a reflection of the sometimes grim but usually hopeful tone of hard sf.

Much of the charm of Frank Herbert's hugely successful *Dune*, written several years after *Mission of Gravity*, lies in its working out of the implications of life on a desert planet. Herbert used massive research to buttress his imagination, and the book compels us because the consequences of the rigorous environment, as the plot unveils them, seem logical and *right*. Fred Pohl's *Gateway* — a New Wave-influenced novel with futuristic psychotherapy and angst as a frame — uses stellar astronomy, scrupulously rendered. Except for some superstrong materials to wire it all together, Larry Niven's *Ringworld* conforms to physics as we know it now. It follows a band of explorers who trek across an immense ring which circles a star, spinning to create centrifugal "gravity." The ring is so immense it can harbor life across a surface many times larger than the area of the Earth. Making this all work is great fun, with ideas unveiled by plot turns at a smooth pace. The sheer size of everything overwhelms the reader, but the game is played straight and true, no cards up the sleeve.

Well, almost. I noticed, along with many others, that the ring had a distressing property—shove it sideways and it coasts into its star. This instability can be righted by installing attitude jets on the outer rim. Niven didn't know this, but he added the jets to his sequel—a good example of holding true to the ideas of contemporary physics.

The crucial opening assumption can be pretty fanciful, though. Suppose Earth has been immersed in a medium which dumbed down all species, as in Poul Anderson's *Brain Wave*. What would happen when

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we got suddenly smarter—and so did the animals, including Rover and Puss? In *Shield* Anderson asks, What happens if somebody invents a perfect defensive screen against all weapons, making Jeffersonian individualism a hard fact? Or suppose there is a gene which confers immortality against disease and aging—though not against, say, being crushed by a landslide?

Near immortals would be very different people. Anderson's *The Boat of a Million Years* follows a handful of these developing oddities through ancient history up to the present, then beyond. Most specialists on aging believe it arises as a side effect of relentless natural selection for reproductive efficiency in younger years, a menu of traits which make for more and better children but take their toll in the end. Given that one gene, though, Anderson's logic proceeds smoothly to a grand finale.

Robert Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps" examines time travel—a far more fanciful notion than a moon colony—in all its overlapping paradoxes, turning the plot on its head in strictly logical fashion. Time travel brings into play immense possibilities, but it lies at the margin of hard sf. Are paradoxes inevitable—or can you really shoot your grandfather and still survive? There is a considerable body of sophisticated theoretical research devoted to probing whether physics can in principle exclude time travel, and the jury—after many physics papers about faster-than-light particles (tachyons) and wormholes in spacetime—is still out. Nearly all physicists are very doubtful. But no *fact* makes these ideas mistaken. I consider a properly couched time travel yarn marginally within the hard sf boundary—and so do the scientists I know. I spent a lot of time justifying this to myself in a novel, *Timescape*, which wound up having to use quantum mechanics to escape paradox. Hard sf writers will do a lot of work to make their creations as solid-seeming as possible.

Sf can reach even further afield than time travel and keep its credentials. Asimov used his broad knowledge of science to make an apparent impossibility—element plutonium 186—become real, by inventing a scientifically plausible method of connecting parallel universes. *The Gods Themselves* is his most scientifically oriented novel, producing the "feel" of hard sf through meticulous logic. His *Foundation* series, on the other hand, envisions social science as hard as physics, capable of making exact predictions—but somehow, the "hard" effect is less telling than in *The Gods Themselves*.

The drone of meticulous expla-

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nation appears often, almost like a bizarre fetish—because the authors want to retain the authority of nonfiction, its touchstones of an external (though provisional) truth. Thus the writer may stretch a quantitative point for dramatic effect, but not commit the unpardonable sin of lying—giving scientific misinformation to the reader. This sets tensions afoot in the plot, from the peculiar difficulty and excitement of building narrative suspense

Rigor can have other drawbacks. Stories can turn on whether a match will stay lit in an orbiting spacecraft (convection of hot smoke away from the flame depends on hot air being lighter; Hal Clement, "Fireproof"). This sets up a tension between narrative drama and fidelity to facts. Most writers feel that scientific errors or finessed facts should be at least invisible to the lay reader—remembering, though, that the best reader is sophisticated and not easily fooled. They love to catch each other in oversights. (Heinlein once skewered me about the freezing point of methane, and I was mortified.) They even show off a bit by pioneering, rationalizing territory previously regarded as the province of fantasy. In "Magic, Inc." Heinlein treated magic as a technology with rules as strict as a chess game. Larry Niven followed with stories in which magic (mana) was simply a natural resource, used up in ancient times (*The Time of the Warlock*), leaving us with merely the scientific laws we know now.

To really get the science right, you have to know the scientists. This is an aspect of *verisimilitude* — imbuing fantastic events with convincing detail. Piling on well-worked-out nuances derived from the science and technology. C.S. Lewis termed this "realism of presentation," as in his *Out of the Silent Planet*; in its simplest form it uses names, geography, maps, titles of nobility, etc. Fantasy shares this trait, as in Tolkien, but the distinctive hard sf method is to fix upon a few surprising but logical consequences of the scientific facts. The most unexpected, the better. The moon colonists in Heinlein's "The Menace from Earth" notice that their low gravity allows people to fly in pressurized domes—creating a tourist industry.

In *The Rolling Stones* Heinlein's savvy traders deduce that Martian gravity and sandy soil will make bicycles a thrifty, overlooked method of transport. They make a killing, like many self-sufficient hard sf heroes.

Getting the voice right is essential. Fred Pohl's "Day Million" is a frustrated rant, expressing the author's despair at ever conveying to his reader how wondrously dif-

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ferent the far future will be—yet it tries anyway, with compact expository lumps like grumpy professorial lectures. This is one of the voices of hard sf itself, trying to punch through humanist complacency about the supposed centrality of human perspectives and comforts. Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" also hammers relentlessly (and melodramatically), invoking the constraints of gravity, orbital mechanics, and fuel levels. These two stories talk across the rapid social evolution between Godwin's (1954) and Pohl's (1966). Godwin used the indifference of the universe to frame a morality tale in which a woman suffers because she tries to use her innocence to avoid responsibility. Pohl doesn't personify human insularity in a woman, but in the reader himself—and ends by directly addressing that reader, assumed to be a callow young man, indeed, perhaps even the techno-weenie some see as the hard core hard sf audience.

The most important voice to get right is the style of scientists themselves. This takes considerable craft; scientists at work are less interesting than watching paint dry. James Gunn's *The Listeners* opens each portion with lengthy quotations from the scientific literature, with radio astronomers debating the philosophy of listening for extraterrestrial intelligence.

Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* uses crisp, though long, arguments between astronomers, complete with equations. They try to cope with an immense, super-intelligent plasma cloud which swoops out of interstellar space and envelops the entire inner solar system.

The astronomers are sharply rendered, shrinking the huge perspectives down to clashes of style and personality. Outside their observatories and conference rooms, the rest of humanity panics, resorting to religious frenzy and misled by dull-witted politicians who pay little attention to the scientists (a favorite Hoyle theme). Much sf struggles to reduce the vast canvas of astronomy to human scale by rendering the scientists in detail—jargon, warts and all.

Science can make the world seem surreal, a symptom of culture lagging behind technological reality; Blake's tilting at his satanic windmills plays differently now, because while they may still seem ugly to us, they are no longer bizarre. This is the problem with using current emblematic objects, as J. G. Ballard does with abandoned Cape Canaveral launch pads and traffic islands. Declaring this way that "modernity" ends in unreal landscapes fixes the author in the moment, tied to aesthetic attitudes

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which date quickly. Hard sf has a more flinty view of external artifacts, often taking them matter-of-factly.

2001: A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick's fruitful collaboration with Arthur C. Clarke, uses both major realms of hard sf—the near-future grittyness, and far-flung symbolism. In its symbolism and philosophical import science has the most impact, I feel.

Since the eighteenth century, science has been widely seen as a better way to understand our world than either myth or religion—two elements which, used at face value in fantastic fiction, typically yield fantasy. Hard sf favors a universe which cares nothing for us, yet furnishes wondrous perspectives, like an immense cathedral of an unfathomable alien faith.

In Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero* a runaway starship cannot brake itself and so must accelerate forever, leaving our galaxy, boosting ever closer to the unreachable speed of light. As relativity theory dictates, time slows on board while the universe outside expands, galaxies age, and finally the expansion halts and an inevitable contraction begins. Against this exterior majesty Anderson contrasts the petty wrangles and sexual misadventures of the crew trapped in a cramped human vessel, responding only fitfully to the massive perspectives they witness. They pass through the inward collapse of the universe, through to the rebirth, scrapping and struggling all the way.

Anderson achieved this effect by using a technique of Olaf Stapledon. His first champter covers a few hours, the second a few days, the third several weeks—a logarithmic progression in time. Each chapter has about the same wordage, which allows the reader enough time to get used to this new time span, then whisks her up another order of magnitude. New perspectives demand new literary techniques.

The hard sf symbolism of H.G. Wells's crab scuttling across a worn beach at the end of time announced that the young genre could talk about the biggest of questions. Immensity comes naturally to astronomers, who daily deal with events and distances which we literally cannot comprehend except through mathematical notation.

Even mission to our outer planets take for their planning, launch and rendezvous a working scientist's lifetime. Everywhere, as science pushes on, time and space transcend our ready perceptions. With a taste for the huge, novels such as Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* portray alien intelligences which are literally enormous (in this case, a planet-covering ocean which doesn't fit

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Darwinian ideas, to say the least). Lem's career has often dealt with science's limitations as hopelessly human-centered, with no true credentials to talk about the world as it truly is—a posture owing much to the rather dated views of the philosopher David Hume.

A favorite device casting human mortality against the inexorable laws of the universe appears in Arthur Clarke's "Transit of Earth." Here the doomed astronaut witnesses the uncaring clockwork precision of planetary orbits, communicating his awe and dread back to people comfortably safe. This motif contrasts human social insulation with the distance assumed in the physical and biological sciences. This method appears in James Gunn's "Cave of Night" and Clarke has used it many times, notably in a story with an astronaut who seems doomed to crash back onto the moon in a spent rocket, and radios goodbye to his wife on Earth—but manages a solution at the last minute, a more typically pulp ending. Both "Transit of Earth" and Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" profit from not attempting a pleasant finish, remorselessly sticking with the assumptions of the story. The impersonality of the universe ultimately stands for its authority.

Immensity has a beauty all its own, one of the cliches of the field. The beautiful often demands the cultivated exclusion of natural forces, so artifacts emerge cool and serene, as in *2001*. The horrific is then the repressed return of those forces, the breakdown, as in so many disaster novels.

In contrast, we meet the very small in Paul Preuss's *Broken Symmetries* (particle physics and its mileau) and James Blish's "Surface Tension." Whatever the symbol—giant quasisexual spacecraft, divine aliens, Edenlike planets—many writers seem searching for the sense of strangeness. Robert Forward's *Dragon's Egg* explores life on a neutron star, with gravity so strong the atmosphere is an inch high. Conventional literature occasionally embraces the strange, as in William Golding's *The Inheritors* about Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon, and Richard Adams' *The Plague Dogs* with its passages told from a canine point of view.

Yet all this rational hardness gives over frequently to mysticism. Edgar Allen Poe's "A Descent into the Maelstrom" uses a natural, though exotic, phenomenon to reveal the arabesques of reality. His hero escapes by solving his problem rationally, and the experience unsettles his worldview. The concrete whipsaws us against the ineffable.

Awe can arise naturally from as

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simple a childhood question as, if the sun was an orange and the Earth a pea, how big would the solar system be? (About a mile.) While Darwin won the battle with religion in the nineteenth century, spirituality, after all, isn't as easy a target as organized religion; in fact, often they conflict. Transcendental beauty and awe are always with us in literature, from Lucretius' observation that exquisitely interconnected nature yields inexpressible joy. Sometimes this corkscrews into sf heroes who become the Messiah (*Dune, Stranger in a Strange Land*). At its best it gives vistas beyond conventional literature, as in the images of ascending into new states in Clarke's *Childhood's End* and Greg Bear's *Blood Music*.

These novels echo the man I consider the first grand master of hard sf transcendentalism, Olaf Stapledon. From his first work, *Last and First Men*, through *Star Maker* and *Sirius*, he gave us cool condensates of pure imagination, uncluttered by the apparatus of novels—characters and incidents, talk and action— yet quite fictional. His imagination moved with a grave solemnity, seldom granting a nod toward the everyday. Stapledon had digested Darwin-Wallace evolution, together with the just- emerging view of stars, too, as evolutionary.

With graceful cadence, he paired the progression of intelligence as another element in the natural scheme, with the lives of stars from early compression to fiery deathtroes, the slow massive workings of red giants and white dwarves—anthropomorphic names for vast, imponderable energies. Cosmic evolution from brute matter, up through stellar element-building, through simple primordial chemistry and into blossoming life, is a far more beautiful image than the popular view of evolution. Stapledon anticipated this in the 1930s, blending the nineteenth century flavor of Schopenhauer's philosophy of being with Spengler's clockworky cyclic history into a vision of man as "a fledgling caught in a brush fire"—certainly not the expansive, humanistic "measure of all things."

At times Stapledon seemed one of those "intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic" in H.G. Wells' unforgettable description of the Martians, itself the grandest nineteenth century hard sf novel. Stapledon directly inherited much in method and manner from Wells. Other British thinkers such as J.D. Bernal and Fred Hoyle follow this tradition. (Jules Verne became the forefather of the other face of hard sf, twentieth century optimistic techno-philia.) Brian Aldiss termed Stapledon's work "great classical ontological epic prose poems." Yet

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against this sober canvas, the largest ever constructed in fiction, *Last and First Men* concludes that "Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars." This mirrors the tension in hard sf between its inhuman landscapes which dwarf us, and the fictional demand that makes people, especially their emotions, central. Stapledon's solution, fiction without people in the foreground, was extreme—and has outlasted innumerable works of humanistic merit.

How does hard sf sit in the recent cataloging of literature by critics—structuralist, post-modern, deconstructionist, etc? To many sf writers, me included, "post-modern" is simply a signature of exhaustion. Its typical apparatus—self-reference, dollops of irony, self-conscious use of older genre devices, pastiche and parody—betrays a lack of invention. Some deconstructionists have attacked science itself as mere rhetoric, not an ordering of nature. I suspect they seek to reduce it to the status of the ultimately arbitrary humanities.

At the core of hard sf lies the experience of science, which conventional literature mostly ignores—though as J.G. Ballard remarked, the trouble with sf is often that it is not a literature won from experience. This means that hard sf is finally hostile to the current fashion in criticism, for it values its empirical ground. Deconstructionism's stress on contradictory or self-contained internal differences in texts, rather than their link to reality, often merely leads to literature seen as empty word games.

Post-modernism seems to most hard sf writers as fiction about media-saturated cultures, with the attention span of MTV, and not about the deeper facets which make that culture—particularly, not about the implications of science seen up close. Postmodernist literary theorists have embraced some sf authors who display a conspicuous stylistic gloss—Ballard, William Gibson—because they write primarily about the surfaces of the technosphere which now envelopes us. This places these writers at the edge for hard sf, for the "info-universe" immersing us stems directly from advanced technology—though they often don't fathom the underlying ideas which produces the shiny technical surfaces.

"Cyberspace" is a realm inside computer spaces, which characters can inhabit. In Vernor Vinge's pioneering *True Names* and Charles Platt's *The Silicon Man* atmospheric weirdness dominates the mood. More often cyberspace is a magical realm with a high-tech gloss, as in

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Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Depicting computer-saturated futures is difficult if you actually don't have a clue how computers work—but it can make compelling reading, as in Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic." Still relevant are earlier stories, such as Asimov's "The Last Word" and Gordon Dickson's "Computers Don't Argue."

Directly opposite this concern with the present, science fantasy uses the trappings of hard sf—spaceships, jargon, high tech ornaments—awash in the devices and thought-patterns of fantasy. Galactic cultures coexist with feudal planets, complete with their swords, queens, and quests. A near neighbor is hard sf, though—techno-empire sf, such as Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye*. The science is right and the action supports conflict and military virtues as eternal features—plausible assumptions, alas.

Like other subgenres of fantastic literature, hard sf works in part because it is an ongoing discussion. Its authors speak of "playing the game"—getting striking but physically plausible scenes into their work, and being able to defend their extravagances with "hard" scientific arguments, even calculations. This resembles the pleasures of police procedural novels and classic puzzle mystery stories, with their meticulous accuracy of method and logic.

Genre readers immerse themselves in a system of thought, so that each fresh book or story is a further exploration of that system, mental play illuminated by all the reader has discovered before. Genres layer.

Science and technology are more complex systems than crime or international intrigue or westerns or romances, affording both wider and odder pleasures. The flip side of this is a daunting genre vernacular, making works somewhat unintelligible to the newcomer until he learns the ropes. With learned genre competency come the pleasures of cross-talk—the books speak to each other in an ongoing debate over big issues, such as our place in creation, the nature of consensual reality, etc. Both readers and writers form a kind of "virtual club" which inspires real feelings of companionship and loyalty.

So George Zebrowski's *Macrolife* speaks to Stapledon and Clarke and Aldiss; Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* and Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero* answer Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*; Clarke and Charles Sheffield publish novels in the same year about building towers from Earth to high orbit; David Brin's *Earth* reflects the early ecological themes of George Stewart's

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Earth Abides and John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*. The mathematical lattices of computer intelligences inform Rudy Rucker's *White Light*, the concepts evolving through Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels* and Charles Platt's *The Silicon Man*. John Varley's *Steel Beach* and Allen Steele's *Lunar Descent* take up from Heinlein's sense of the future as a frontier, rewarding hard-nosed ambition with head-spinning possibilities. Michael Kube-McDowell's *The Quiet Pools*, Roger McBride Allen's *Ring of Charon* and Thomas McDonough's *The Architects of Hyperspace* glance over their shoulders at galaxy-spanning epics of A.E. Van Vogt, E.E. Smith, and Jack Williamson. The long perspectives in time of Anderson's *The Boat of a Million Years* achieve a lofty yet warmly human view, as Brian Aldiss did in his Helliconia trilogy.

This contrasts strongly with "serious" fiction, which proceeds from canonical classics that supposedly stand outside of time, deserving of awe, great and intact by themselves. Genres are more like immense discussions, with ideas developed, traded, varied; players ring changes on each other—a jazz band, not a solo concert in a plush auditorium.

But hard sf and other genres are no less "serious," merely less solemn. I suspect readers of "serious" fiction are probably more likely to blame themselves if they find a book from the approved canon boring; a genre reader blames the writer.

Genre pleasures are many, but this quality of an on-going discussion may be the most powerful, enlisting lifelong devotion in its fans. In contrast to the Grand Canon view, genre reading satisfactions are a striking facet of modern democratic ("pop") culture. Hard sf writers have an unusual camaraderie, even within the genre. They produce more collaborations than other types of science fiction authors, and in the free trading of ideas often behave like scientists. Modern science itself shares many genre features of steadily developed ideas, communal feeling, and open discourse, especially in a time when papers in learned journals can have fifty authors.

I think hard sf ultimately is the voice of a class, the scientifically literate, which listens to a music they can hear best. Their needs are not met by conventional fiction, and won't be, for it caters to other classes, other cultures.

Hardness in fiction, whether sf or a police procedural novel, is a cultivated taste. In a nation of declining science-related skills, written hard sf may reach a shrinking audience, though its taste for high-tech imagery may continue to be widely influential.

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Still, I hope its aesthetic goals may still occupy the center of the field—even though much recent sf has returned to the old styles, in which fidelity to scientific facts and world view are subordinated to conventional literary virtues of character or style or setting. In this sense, alas, hard sf may be a paradigm more often honored in the breech than not.

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Tor Books just published Esther M. Friesner's first hardback novel, YESTERDAY WE SAW MERMAIDS. Her next paperback fantasy novel, MAJIK BY ACCIDENT, will be published by Ace in September 1993. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies as well as in the major magazines, and she now writes a non-fiction advice column for Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine. *About this story, she writes, "I started to write 'Sugar Daddy' as straight wish-fulfillment. I mean, having the fun without the consequences and the guilt is guaranteed under the Bill of Rights, isn't it! (As the late Al Capp said in the 'Mockaroni' episode of* Li'l Abner, *'Eat like a swine and stay slim as a snake! It's the American Dream!') Then I added a healthy dose of Power Corrupts and there I was. As founder and head of the First Church of Chocolate ('Salvation Through Calories: Remember, God is half of Godiva!') I think I've done my duty."*

Sugar Daddy

By Esther M. Friesner

"IS THIS GOING TO hurt?" Warren eyed the needle with distrust.

"Not a bit." The man in the lab coat grinned, showing off a mouthful of gloriously white teeth. "Trust me; I'm a doctor. *Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha!*" With a charming wink he added, "Just fooling. I love to see how high they jump when I let loose with that mad scientist cackle." He swabbed down Warren's scrawny upper arm with alcohol and administered the injection with the same cavalier skill Errol Flynn demonstrated when he shish-kebabbed Basil Rathbone in the old Robin Hood flick.

The pang of envy Warren felt hurt worse than any needle. The man was just so *graceful*, so *in control!* And he was handsome, too — Warren knew the man was more than handsome, he was gorgeous.

Not that Warren was attracted to him or anything — sex had nothing to do with this. Warren was simply that perfect, unbiased, peerless judge of

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masculine beauty: the unbelievably ugly man.

It wasn't fair. Warren knew there were lots of people who had better jobs than he did, or better minds, or better personalities, or better finances, and as for the ones who had better looks—! Hell, he'd known about *that* nasty little fact of life long before he learned some of the more fun ones. There would always be the Haves and the Have-nots: Why did he have to come face-to-heartbreaking-face with one of the Have-it-alls?

"I said, I think I've seen your face somewhere before," the doctor repeated, giving Warren's arm the finishing swipe with a cotton ball.

"Huh?" The doctor said it one more time. "Oh. Maybe you did." Warren's blobby chin dipped down until his tiny eyes were fixed on the bulging arc of his infant paunch. "I model." He said it so softly that it would take state-of-the-art spyware to hear. That way, if the doctor laughed at him, he could always claim he'd said something else.

The doctor didn't laugh. "Yeah, *that's* it!" He snapped his fingers, grinning. "You were in that rock video, weren't you? The new one by Binge 'n' Purge, what's the name, *Can't Do It for Money*? With Gianna."

"The supermodel, right, that's the one." Warren looked up, pleased, incredulous not only because he'd been believed about the modeling thing, but also that someone like the doctor had taken notice of him. "I was just an extra. I didn't know it'd been released yet — we just got it in the can last Tuesday."

He loved talking about his other job as if he really knew things about the business. Somehow it made him feel almost visible if he stood there mentally chanting *get it in the can, get it in the can* like a mantra while the director hollered abuse at the extras and the stars ignored them and the small army of flunkies, floozies and flacks on the set treated them like sheep turds with legs.

And this man — this stunning example that there were fairy-tale lives out there where everything always goes right, thus keeping the universe in balance against the Warrens of this world — this man had actually seen him, remembered him, mentioned him in passing. For a moment he felt almost worthy to have a real conversation with this guy. "You see it on MTV?" he asked eagerly.

"No, you were right when you said they haven't released it yet. I was on the set while you taped it. I sort of had to be, like it or not." He gave a modest chuckle. "I'm living with Gianna."

Warren walked out of the lab numb, barely aware of his surroundings. He was trapped in a giant metal ball with IT'S NOT FAIR! spray-painted in scarlet

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all over the inside. The secretary had to run after him to have him sign all the paperwork to make sure he got paid for volunteering his time and his body.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Carlyle," she said, forcing a smile. Warren noticed. It hurt, but he couldn't help keeping a running tally of all the people in the world who found it hard to smile naturally at a face like his.

"When do they want me back?" he asked, his voice flat.

"Didn't Dr. Whaley tell you?"

Warren shrugged. The secretary frowned. He could almost hear her thinking, *Not just ugly, but dumb!* She picked up the phone and made a call. The words were only so much buzzing to his ears. After she hung up, there was no more pretense of a smile.

"One month. And you were supposed to ask me to give you a project diary. We're studying the physiology of human chemoreceptivity." She tossed off the fancy words as proudly as if she were Dr. Whaley's equal partner in science. Warren knew the feeling of hitching a ride with the real people too well to say a word.

"Specifically, we're studying taste. You were given an injection which might alter your perception of one or more of the four common flavors —salt, sweet, bitter and sour. Before Dr. Whaley sent you out, you *were* asked —" she hit the word hard enough to make him wince for his inattention "— to eat only those foods already common to your diet." Saying *diet* must have triggered some sort of automatic reaction in the woman. Her eyes strayed slowly, cruelly, down Warren's squat, pudgy body, his incongruous stickman arms and legs making him look like an Italian food fantasy crafted entirely from meatballs and breadsticks. When her lip curled again, it wasn't in a smile.

"No changes in eating habits, right," Warren mumbled, miserable. He took the diary. "And I write down any changes I observe in here. Only there might not be any, because I might be part of the control group and all Dr. Whaley gave me was a placebo."

"You know all that?" For an instant, the secretary almost looked ready to treat Warren with the dignity due a clever pet mongrel.

"I've been here before," he replied a trifle too avidly. It wasn't often he found a woman interested enough in him to ask him a question, any question not immediately connected with their business at hand.

Not often? Never.

Small wonder Warren leaped heedlessly into a stream of babble, bent on either sweeping the lady off her feet in the torrent or drowning himself in the

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attempt. "Lots. See, I'm a grad student in English — the Romantic era — only my stipend ran out after the first five years, and if I take a teaching assignment I'll never get my dissertation done because I'm a slow writer, what with all the papers you've got to read and correct, and the tests too, so I pick up a little extra money as a lab volunteer. It's not much, but I've got another part-time job, too, and that helps —"

"Oh," said the secretary, her eyes already darting from side to side, a cornered critter seeking an out. "Really. How interesting." Warren only heard the words, not the crisp, automatic way she said them. She brightened when she caught sight of the big clock just outside the lab door. "My, look at the time. I have to get these papers downstairs. If you'll excuse me —" She indiscriminately scooped up an armful of unrelated file folders, bound reports, loose manuscript pages, and her latest copy of *Cosmopolitan.*

"I'm going downstairs," Warren offered, stretching out fat hands with bristly backs and carelessly clipped fingernails. "I can help you carry all that."

"No, no, don't bother. I can manage." The secretary was inching away from him, the backs of her knees pressed up against the seat of her chair. She hooked one foot around its wheeled base and got it between them. Just then, Dr. Whaley stuck his head out of the lab.

"Oh, there you are, Warren; good. I was hoping to catch you," he said. "Listen, I've been thinking: could you do me a favor? That modeling agency you're with — are they reputable and do they use kids?"

"Modeling agency?" The secretary was staring at Warren again, this time bereft of any idea of what to make of him.

Warren grabbed onto the notion that she was simply impressed to learn what his other part-time job was. He was an absolute limpet when it came to holding fast to illusions. "They're O.K. on both counts, Dr. Whaley," he replied, puffing out his chest. Or trying to.

"Well, my sister's got it into her head that her kid's the next Brooke Shields, and if your agency's on the level — there's a lot of sharks out there preying on stage mothers and I'd hate to see a sweet kid like Kari get taken for a — wait a minute, I've got her picture right here, I'll show you just how —" He flicked out his wallet where another man would fumble and opened it to show off a school photo of an adorable little golden-haired girl-child.

Warren gazed at the female equivalent of Dr. Whaley's physical perfection and felt his heart sink. Sometimes when you met one of the flawless ones, you could lie to yourself and say their very existence was a fluke, a freak, a light-

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ning bolt that didn't strike more than once outside of Fantasy Land. Yet here was hard evidence that they were not only numerous, but breeding.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Whaley," he said heavily. "My agency wouldn't be interested in your niece at all."

"Why not?" One red-gold brow rose. Warren could hear the secretary utter a small, fluttering sigh. "You said they use kids."

"Not kids who look like her." Warren dug into his own pocket and jerked out the poor-cousin-twice-removed to Dr. Whaley's wallet. With many a slip and flub, he finally brought out a battered business card and handed it to the doctor.

Dr. Whaley read it in silence, then looked up. "'Gargoyles, Inc.?" he asked, astounded.

"They specialize in . . . interesting-looking people." Warren felt like a fool for saying it, but he still couldn't bring himself to tell the truth he knew in his soul: *They cast monsters.*

The secretary burst into loud, harsh laughter.

WHAT'S THAT, Warren?" the extra next to him asked, peering over his shoulder while Warren scribbled in his project diary.

"Just something I do to pick up a few extra bucks, Bob," Warren replied, jotting down the last item he had had for breakfast — hot chocolate — followed by the comment: *No noticeable change in taste.*

"Boy, wish I could get money for nothing like that." Bob shook his head in quiet wonder. He was a skinnier version of Warren, proof positive that if Warren would "just take off a few pounds if you think you're so fat and ugly," like his mother was constantly urging him, he would reap the reward of becoming a *thin* ugly guy.

"I'll give you a phone number to call." Warren stuffed the diary into his pants pocket and hoped it wouldn't fall out before they were done shooting this scene. The jeans he wore were wardrobe-issue, frayed and tattered in keeping with the whole image of violent contrasts the director was going after. Surrounded by a crowd of extras too freakish for a Fellini movie, the band would shine even brighter in their expertly calculated, *haute coutured* scruffiness.

Sure, Warren thought bitterly. *Who's going to notice that the lead singer's got lips like a camel when he's shown up against someone like me? It's not fair!*

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If I had what he's got going for him, I wouldn't let them use people like — well, like me — just to make my own image look better. I'd at least take the time to say a word or two to the extras, pretend we were human, pretend like I cared. Only I wouldn't have to pretend; I would care. Yeah, if I won the lottery or a sweepstakes or if Ed McMahon came to my house or something, the first thing I'd do with all my good luck is come back here to the set and spread a little of it around.

Warren's musing took him off into a dream of down-lined limousines brimming with bushel baskets of fifty-dollar bills. A sharp-dressed Warren lounged back among the cushions, handing out cash to his former co-workers. He didn't merely scatter largesse indifferently; he took the time to speak to each and every one of the little people he'd left behind.

He only paused in his philanthropy to order his bodyguards to seek out all the bikinied, sequined, pouty babes who were as much a video staple as extreme close-ups and crotch-shots. When a herd of these exquisite brats had been rounded up for his inspection, the dream-Warren stood on the roof of his white limousine and declaimed:

You were extra, too, but did you ever have a kind word to say to us! A polite word, even! No. You were always cozying up to the real people. Well, how about this, ladies! [He reached into the sleek white suit he was suddenly wearing and yanked out fistfuls of jewels, big and swollen and sparkly spectacular the way they were drawn in Saturday-morning cartoons.] *Is this real enough for you!*

He flung the gems to the women and watched like grim Judgment as they dove for them, squabbling. But as soon as one of them grabbed a jewel, it exploded in her face, the blast transforming her from tasty model/actress/-bimbo supreme to unkempt, uncute and uncared-for extra.

"Now you know how it feels," Warren murmured, eyes half-closed, arms folded over the top of his belly.

A sharp thump right in the middle of his back knocked him off his folding chair. Tottering sideways, unable to make it to his feet, Warren flailed the air helplessly as the momentum of his massive body pitched him up against one raw-brick corner of the studio.

"Yeah, and now you know how it feels to talk to a fuckin' wall!" the assistant director hollered. "A wall of lard, damn it. Get up and get your fat ass over there or we'll pick someone else."

"Pick —?" Warren got up slowly, bewildered.

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"Jimmy's got some asshole idea for a shot, that's all." The assistant director spoke of his immediate superior with sour contempt. "Big artsy-fartsy *con*-cept. And he wants you to be part of the *con*-cept."

"Me?" Warren glanced nervously toward the set. Techies were fussing over dry ice and smoke machines. A bevy of teenaged gloss-princesses in vinyl thong swimsuits lounged all over the meticulously arranged tableau of smashed-up cars and limbless mannequins. The band members were standing off to one side, joking easily among themselves. The bassist looked up and gave one of the spandex sylphs a wink. Obediently she got up and teetered to his side — didn't every woman wear five-inch heels with her bikini? An imaginary pencil stuck between her buttocks would have left a trail of figure eights on the air.

On the other side of the set, Warren saw the director deep in bitter argument with a young woman. She was beautiful. More than beautiful, if truth be told. Coupled to a flawless arrangement of eyes, hair, breasts, legs, all in the proportions and quantities and colors beloved of the media moment, she had the something extra that — well, that made her a something, not an extra.

The assistant director's lips twisted into a spiteful smile. "I knew she wouldn't do it," he said with chop-licking satisfaction. "Thia's not just one of Jimmy's ooh-please-yes-anything-you-say vid-chicks. Hell, she's dating Yog —" He mentioned the lead singer's name with the reverence due to so much money "— and if she walks, Yog sulks, and if Yog sulks, Jimmy-boy is out on his fuckin' A."

Warren's eyes got wide. He knew Thia — not personally, of course. He recognized the lady from a hundred glossy magazines, recalled her glimmering body from an award-winning series of eyeliner ads memorable because eyeliner was the only thing the model wore.

He read in the papers that when questioned by the press, Thia had shrugged those glorious shoulders and said that she was a professional; there was little she would not do "if it's not gratuitous but contributes to the *gestalt* of the artist's visual concept as a whole." [One petty printhack had dared to niddle over the fact that Thia mispronounced "*gestalt*" twice before she got the whole sentence out. Everyone said it served him right when Thia's bodyguard smashed his camera, his cameraman, and him.] Yet there she stood, *gestalt* be damned, fighting with the director! The enormity of the implication was staggering.

"What did he want to have her do?" he whispered, imagining all the lewd

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and decadent images from past videos and adding a few of his own personal best.

"Kiss you."

Warren's stomach hurt. If there had been a forward-looking entrepreneur ready on the spot to sell man-sized snail shells, he would have had a no-price-asked customer right then. The difference of artistic opinion was escalating before Warren's eyes. Thia tossed her sheaf of silver-blonde hair back and forth, the utter surgical precision of her cut almost whipping out a flustered makeup man's eye. She caught sight of Warren, pointed at him so vehemently that there could be no doubt for whom the gel-nail jabbed, then stuck the selfsame finger down her throat accompanied by loud, theatrical gagging sounds.

"Fine." Warren pulled his head down between pillowy shoulders. "You don't have to spell it out. I don't need the money that badly." Which was a lie. "I'm out of here."

But he wasn't. In fact, he hadn't even managed to waddle halfway back to Wardrobe before the formidable Yog's voice reached out, without benefit of mike, amps, or AT&T, and touched Warren's life in a way that changed it forever.

And all he said was, "O.K., Thia, you don't have to kiss him. Jeni here says she's willing to take the part."

The shriek of rage froze Warren where he stood. He turned, helpless prey to the same human weakness that draws rubberneckers to highway bloodbaths, just in time to see Yog, a raven-haired titternymph on his arm, facing an incandescent Thia who was telling the whole studio precisely which part the cooperative little vidi-kitty could take and exactly where she could put it.

She ended her diatribe by declaiming, "All right, I'll *do* the fucking shot! You!" She snapped her fingers and once more shot a claw at Warren. "Fatboy! Come here!"

"I'm just going to —," he began.

"I said *come here!*"

He did. There was never any question that he would not. Warren craved beauty; Warren envied beauty; Warren resented beauty; but most of all, Warren feared beauty. A woman like Thia had an all-body handle on a weapon he could never understand, but he was smart enough to dread. He could have kept walking, he could have told her no, and he knew that a

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slender slip of a thing like her would never be able to do him any sort of physical harm.

He also knew that all she'd have to do was turn to one of the brawny roadies, whisper one tiny promise in his ear, and the next day would dawn over a bashed and battered Warren in some allegorical alleyway.

The director was shouting at him. Warren blinked away the phantom images of his own pathetic corpse. "— just *stand* there and let her kiss you, got that?" Warren nodded. "But remember: No reaction. Not a twitch. Not a quiver. The concept demands it. Do I make myself clear?" Warren nodded again. "Good." The director thumbed back the shiny bill of his fake Army-brass cap and smiled — not at Warren, of course. "O.K., darling," he told Thia. "You're being a good little girl and I'm grateful. What say we try to get this out of the way in one take?"

"We'd better," the model snarled. There was only ice and oil in her eyes as she finally deigned to look at her one-shot co-star. "Fuck this up and I'll have your balls, Fatboy," she murmured. Then she hollered for the makeup man to put another layer of Vaseline on her lips.

Warren was thinking it was just like English Channel swimmers greasing up their bodies, hoping to keep the touch of the icy waters at bay, when the director yelled for action. Without a word, Thia grabbed him by the jowls, yanked him toward her so violently he felt one of her gel-nails pierce his cheek, and jammed her mouth up against his.

It should have been ecstasy. To Warren it just felt like cramming his mouth into a foam-rubber cushion. Then a thought of sublime horror touched him: Thia's get-it-over-with assault had come so suddenly he hadn't been able to get his teeth together or *close his lips!* A cold pang shot through his heart. What if — through no fault of his own — their tongues touched? The image of his roadie-mangled body acquired a few more random contusions, but there was nothing he could do to save himself. There was a moistness on his tongue that wasn't Vaseline. The unthinkable, the unspeakable had happened. Any moment now he expected to hear Thia emit a bellow of disgust and shove him away.

Any moment now.

Real soon.

In about a second.

Almost immediately.

"Thia, I said *cut!* You can let him drop, we got the shot, it's perfect." The

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director's voice reached Warren through a haze of oxygen deprivation. "Darling, I told you it's over. Let the poor geek go."

Thia's lips came away from Warren's mouth with the languid reluctance of a starfish being peeled from its rock. Her hands remained where they were, holding Warren's head immobile. There was an eerie, dreamlike quality to her eyes as she smiled slowly, sweetly and said, "Fuck off, Jimmy." Then she was on Warren again like a really good-looking buzzard on roadkill.

Except buzzards rarely attempt to remove roadkill's tonsils no-hands. Fighting for breath, Warren desperately tried to recall whether the aftershave he'd used that morning had promised him anything like this.

"Chocolate," Thia sighed. She lay back naked among the rumpled sheets of her waterbed, instinctively arranging her shapely limbs to catch all the best angles of the indirect lighting.

"Again?" Warren asked. He too was naked, although his instinct in such a condition was to hide from all lights and mirrors. He stood in the bedroom doorway, hesitating.

"I bought a box of Godiva's," Thia said closing her eyes and pronouncing the brand name the way visionary nuns of the Middle Ages had called upon the name of their heavenly Bridegroom. "One whole pound. Eat it."

"Listen, are you sure —?"

"Warren, don't I make you . . . happy?" Thia curled up into a feline ball, setting her professional pout on "KILL."

Every drop of natural moisture in Warren's mouth sizzled itself to dust. Each one of his teeth felt naked and alone. All he could reply, given his excellent memory of the past few days, was "Gah."

"Then go eat the chocolate," Thia said, well satisfied. "Not all at once, though. Five pieces at a time, and come back to me before you eat them. You know how I love to watch."

Warren stumbled into Thia's kitchen where the distinctive gold Godiva box reposed on the counter. He lifted the lid and stared at the array of semisweet rapture awaiting his pleasure. Away from Thia's smoldering presence, his saliva came out of hiding to flood his mouth with anticipatory delight. Warren wasn't fat because he used food as a substitute for love or recognition or psychotherapy; Warren just loved the taste.

Poor Thia, he thought, as his chubby fingers lovingly stroked the

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dainty whorls atop each individual bonbon before making his choice. *She even looks at a piece of candy and she's got to do five extra hours with her personal trainer, plus fast for two days. What can she do? Looking how she looks is her life and her living. It's kind of nice that she can get some vicarious pleasure out of watching me eat, though. She says it's because she loves me.* His heart was full of admiration for his ladylove's strength of character as he returned to the bed.

She watched him eat the five pieces of chocolate the same way a vampire might observe his latest maiden rubbing mustard on her neck. No sooner was the last bonbon a memory but Thia passed Warren a glass of mineral water ("I can't afford to swallow even a lick of sugar, darling, you know that.") and waited calmly while he cleansed his mouth completely, then leaped onto him with such force that he whacked his skull on the brass headboard as her impetus bowled him over.

Her mouth was hot on his, her tongue greedy. Much-muffled words escaped her lips in small amorous bursts: "Oooohhh, orange cream! Mmmmm, macadamia nut! Aaaahhhhh, mint! Eeeeee, praline! Oh, oh, oh, *oh!* Oh my God, that last one was a chocolate cream, I just know it was! Ah! Oh! Ah! Ohhhhhhhh!" Then she shuddered and was still.

Very gently Warren rolled Thia off of him. She was in an erotic daze, unable to do more than grin vapidly at the ceiling and purr. It was just as well. Perish forbid a deliberate pun enter the thoughts of an English graduate student, but Warren knew he just didn't feel up to any more strenuous lovemaking. The first four times that evening had been plenty.

Leaving a zombified Thia to her own devices, he went into the living room and got the project diary out of his pants pocket. Before adding the five Godiva tidbits to his day's tally, he reviewed a few previous entries:

One slab of chocolate cheesecake, with raspberry topping. (Thia had insisted he devour it before she took him back to her place and pounced on him the first time.) Taste: normal.

One banana split. (Thia made it for him herself, then initiated seconds.) Taste: normal.

Two slices of piping-hot apple pie. (Thia popped them out of the microwave as a surprise and pressed her bare flesh against his back while supervising every last bite he took, and then —) Taste: normal.

Half a dozen cream puffs with hot-fudge sauce. (Thia could barely wait for him to rinse out his mouth after that one.) Taste: normal.

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Normal?

Warren hadn't done too well in math, but he could add two and two. Normal was not a word he'd apply to this relationship. A man capable of connecting cthonic tropes from the poetry of Lord Byron to kindred examples in the Mozarabic *jarchas* of ninth-century Moorish Spain was also capable of making other connections.

Sometimes, though, it was best to get a confirming professional opinion.

"WHAT THE hell did you *do* to me?" Warren demanded, red-faced and trembling with rage before Dr. Whaley's desk.

The handsome doctor tensed, which only made him look more dedicated and noble. "Kindly lower your voice," he directed, not needing to raise his. "You're making an unnecessary scene."

"Well, *I* think it's necessary," Warren maintained. A wistful presence in his subconscious mind sighed over the Good Old Days when Warren would have sooner died than stand up to such a magnificent specimen as Dr. Whaley. It was astonishing what Thia had done for his self-confidence.

"What's the matter? Have you noted any unusual symptoms?" Dr. Whaley swung his chair around and attacked his computer files. A brief scan of Warren's case made him frown. "You shouldn't be experiencing any distress from the compound we administered. We have previous laboratory proof that it is, in and of itself, harmless." His stern expression seemed to add, *Try to yell "Malpractice," Fatboy, and I'll skin you alive.*

"So I'm not in the control group," Warren mused aloud.

Dr. Whaley's frown intensified. "That was careless of me, but no, you did not receive a placebo. I'm trusting you to respect the confidentiality of this information. May I see your project diary?"

Warren tossed the booklet onto the desk. Dr. Whaley riffled through it, then handed it back. "I see nothing extraordinary reported here."

"I don't care what you see; I know something's wrong."

Dr. Whaley sighed, tilted his chair backward and steepled his fingers. Warren's newly emerged cynical side wondered if the pose were one they taught all medical men in a course called Condescension 101: Talking Down to Fools, Scum, and the Public.

"Warren, the only reason I am going to break regulations is because you are one of this laboratory's best subjects. You've always kept accurate records, always been prompt for your appointments, and up until now

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you've never given us any trouble."

At this point the old Warren would have burbled with gratitude and dismissed his own misgivings as silly. He'd have backed out of Dr. Whaley's Hippocratic presence bowing and scraping every step of the way, apologizing for his temerity and insisting that far be it from him to ruin a perfect record by coming on as a malcontent now.

The old Warren hadn't just come from the bed of the sixth-highest-paid supermodel in the world. The old Warren had never been hand-fed a dozen gourmet éclairs specially flown in from a Paris bakery via the Concorde.

The new Warren simply inclined his head to acknowledge what the doctor said and waited to hear more.

"As you know," Dr. Whaley went on, "this project is studying human chemoreceptivity as it pertains to the sense of taste. You are part of a group in whom we are observing the physiology of how we perceive sweetness."

"You can spare me the lecture about taste buds, Doctor," Warren said graciously. "I still remember my high school bio. Sweet gets tasted at the tip of the tongue, sour —"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple." Dr. Whaley had developed a tiny crease between his flawless brows. "As far as we now know — and we know precious little — it's not just the tongue that lets us taste things. The roof of the mouth, the soft palate, even the ears and the nose affect us. You know how nothing tastes good to you when you've got heavy nasal congestion? That clears up when the cold goes. Well, injure your eardrum and you may find yourself with a more permanent loss of certain taste sensations because the chorda tympani nerve's been irreversibly damaged."

Warren's hands flew up instinctively to shield his ears. A twinkle of the old panic touched his eyes, but only for a moment. "I assume your current experiment hasn't done me any kind of permanent harm?" he asked in a tone that conveyed the postscript *Because if it did, you're dead.*

Dr. Whaley twirled back to his computer screen. "Hardly. As I was saying, we don't know much about the phenomenon of gustation in general, but we do know that sensitivity to sweetness is by far the most mysterious of the four so-called 'basic' tastes we humans sense. Take a single molecule of a sweet-tasting compound and rearrange the atoms —don't change them, just shuffle them around — and you'll get test subjects claiming the substance tastes bitter or has no taste at all."

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"None of which tells me a damned thing about what you're doing to me," Warren said.

The crease between Dr. Whaley's brows deepened. He would have an unpleasant surprise the next time he looked in the mirror. "I've told you all I'm going to tell. Bring suit against us if you like — the release forms you signed when you first volunteered should cover our asses nicely." A malicious grin cracked the perfect tan of his face. "I don't think there's enough paperwork in the world to cover yours."

Warren left Dr. Whaley's office seething. Apart from a few crumbs of information, he was still on his own as far as figuring out what was going on. It had to have something to do with taste, that much would be plain to a brain-damaged bat, but as to specifics. . . . He sighed and dug his hands into his pockets. Happily his fingers hit upon the wrapper of a candy bar he'd bought from a vending machine in the building lobby and had forgotten to eat. He leaned against the reception area wall to peel off the paper, then munched it right up. From her desk, Dr. Whaley's secretary regarded him with the same edgy annoyance as always.

"Are you done?" she inquired sourly, dog-earing her place in the copy of *Cosmopolitan* she'd been reading. Yet another miracle diet had been discovered, even though no one ever thought to publish an article on how to *stay* on all those tasteless, boring, madness-inducing miracle regimes.

"With Dr. Whaley?" Warren asked, licking the last traces of chocolate from his teeth. He helped himself to a cup of water from the cooler. Rinsing out his mouth after eating sweets had become a reflex with him.

"And with your little *snack*," the secretary sniped. "It must be nice not to have to worry about your figure," she added, her own voice dripping saccharine. "I can't remember the last time I got to taste chocolate."

It's a funny thing about epiphanies. Things go *click!* at the darnedest moments. Warren looked at the empty candy bar wrapper, looked at the secretary's famished, angry face, glimpsed the lean-fleshed feminine ideal gracing the cover of *Cosmo*, and the entire universe joined voices in one long, melodious, reverberating *Eureka!*

Of course there was still the corroborating fieldwork to do.

The secretary gave a little scream as Warren reached across her desk, yanked her to her feet, and gave her a hard, definite, openmouthed kiss. The ever-dwindling vestige of the old Warren closed its eyes and trembled at the thought of police to be summoned, charges of sexual assault to be

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preferred. The new Warren just smirked as the secretary's thrashings diminished with the same astonishing rapidity as her reciprocation of Warren's kiss increased.

At last — at very long last — their lips parted, not without much resistance on her part. Rumpled and dewy with satisfaction, all the lady could do was utter a single, husky-voiced phrase, "Mmmmmmm, Milky Way."

"Aha. I thought so," said Warren.

Warren drove to the studio in his new Ferrari, a present from his newest ladylove. His parking spot was waiting for him — not a personalized slot, no such thing in the neighborhood where the studio was located, but an empty space right on the street whose sacred vacancy was being guarded by the biggest, burliest, most simian of roadies. This, too, Warren owed to his current paramour's influence.

Since he hated to parallel-park, Warren just slid the Ferrari up to the empty spot, got out, and snapped his fingers. The roadie lumbered over and took over the driver's seat, knowing what was expected of him. "Scratch it and you're through, Kong," Warren said with a smile. The roadie showed his teeth, too, although with different intent.

Warren ignored it. Threats were for lesser souls to fret over. He hadn't felt this invincible since — well, since the too-few innocent days of his childhood before a cold, cruel playmate told him that "Husky-boy" sizes did not mean "Very muscular for your age," the way Mom claimed.

Inside the studio, the director greeted him like a long-lost blood relative. Makeup artists fawned over him, the lighting crew fussed, key grips kowtowed, even the band observed him with a respect bordering on religious awe. Needless to say, you could follow his progress across the floor by the sighs and yearning whimpers of the day's supply of artfully oiled and polished nymphs.

Just before he reached his goal — the private dressing room his lover had demanded for him — he paused and turned to face the whole of the studio. Slowly, sensuously, with all the bitter spite of long-festering impotent desires for revenge against the tyranny of beauty, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a giant, economy-sized Hershey's Special bar. Inch by devastating inch he peeled back the paper wrapper, the inner foil, until the confection lay glistening and naked in bittersweet chocolate obscenity

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in the palm of his hand. Then, looking directly at the not-yet-supermodel extra who most reminded him of the first girl who'd told him to fuck off, Fatboy, he ate it. And he took his time.

Several causeless quarrels broke out in the studio as he closed his dressing room door behind him. Warren smiled. People on diets got so cranky. People who had to spend their whole lives on diets made Medusa look like the child Shirley Temple.

And then there was Warren.

The phone rang. "Hey, Warren, is that you?"

"Who gave you this number?" Warren stared wrathfully at the mouthpiece. "Who is this?"

"It's me, Warren; Bob. You remember? We worked on a video a couple of weeks ago, the one where you met Thia and —"

"Thia's old news. What do you want? I'm busy."

"Yeah, well, I'm not." The voice at the other end of the line dropped down into the don't-hit-me register. Warren flinched. It hadn't been that long ago when he'd been the one to cringe before those more powerful than he. Which meant just about everyone. It was a past he'd as soon forget.

This caller wouldn't let him do that. "Look, Warren, I remember how you said doing these videos was just a part-time job for you. Uh, that's not how it is for me. I can't find other work, and I need the bread. Big trouble's that lately I can't seem to get cast. I hear through the grapevine that you've got a lot of juice in the business these days. I was wondering if maybe you could put in a good word for —"

"Do I look like an agent?" Warren shouted into the phone and slammed it down. "Some people!" he told the ceiling.

The door opened behind him. He could smell her scent, pungent, thrilling, unmistakable. She didn't need to say a word to let him know she was there. The door closed again. He heard the erotic swish-swish of silk on silk as her long graceful legs brought her ever closer. A slender hand fell on his shoulder.

"Well?" Her voice was amber, musk and roses. "What do you have for me this time, my darling?"

"Guess."

"Ohhh, don't tease me." The hand was joined by its partner. Together they slipped down the front of Warren's shirt, doing wonderful things. Breath like a perfumed wind off the desert made the short hairs on his

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neck prickle as she whispered in his ear, "Chocolate?" He nodded. "Do I have to guess what kind?" He nodded again. "Perugina? Godiva? Neuchatel? Tobler?" She ran through a litany of the exquisite, the forbidden. Each time he let her know by his silence that she was wrong.

"Then I will have to discover the answer for myself," she decreed, and threw herself into his lap, arms wreathing his neck, mouth seeking his eagerly.

Warren stood up without word or warning. She uttered an infant shriek of surprise as her high-rent rump hit the floor. For a time he contemplated the woman sprawled at his feet. If anyone had come to him a year ago — no, a month! — and said, "Warren, my boy, one day soon you're going to find yourself so sought-after by the world's most gorgeous women that they'll resort to bribery, treachery, even violence to make you theirs alone," he would have expected the speaker to have horns, cloven hooves, a tail, and an ironbound contract to be signed in blood. Now this! And why?

He supposed that the closest a poor English graduate student could come to giving the phenomenon a name was the Echo Effect. Except echoes dealt in sound, and this was quite another matter. Somehow or other, a fully accurate sensory impression of the last sweet thing he ate was transmitted to the next person to — there really was no nice way to say it — swap spit with him.

Warren chuckled. When he'd been asked to record in his project diary whether that blessed injection made things taste any different, he would bet his life Dr. Whaley never dreamed that the one thing to taste different would be Warren.

Of course there were many things Dr. Whaley had never anticipated.

"You know the rules, Gianna," Warren said to the lady on the floor. "Nothing from me until you —"

"I don't mind the ears, *caro*, but do I *have* to wear that silly Star Trek costume again?" She pouted, as she did all things, beautifully. "The velour shirt makes me itch."

"Then we'll have to make sure you don't wear it very long. Besides, we've got a video to shoot."

Gianna sighed.

"Hershey's Special," Warren said. "It's bittersweet."

Gianna almost knocked him down in her haste to reach the closet

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where her costumes were kept.

MONTH'S END came too quickly. Under the custom-made Armani suits and the hand-tailored Hong Kong shirts, the old Warren was beginning to pace nervously. Month's end! Life's end, rather. He could deny the symptoms, but his denial would change nothing: He was losing it.

Putting on a brave face, Warren took the elevator up to Dr. Whaley's floor. Without thinking, he stuffed two Reese's peanut butter cups into his mouth and chewed madly. He contrived to sneak chocolate snacks on the hour, more frequently than that when he had an assignation with Gianna. Sometimes it was still no good. No longer did he have the luxury of stretching out the time between his candy-gobbling and the moment he deigned to share the taste — the miraculous, the calorie-free, the real-sugar-no-shit taste with his lady.

Gianna had noticed. She complained that she wasn't getting the same earth-moving cocoa-butter-overload orgasm as before. He put her off with red-herring suggestions that perhaps she was coming down with a cold. Didn't she know that the human sense of taste was very complex and mysterious? Why, if you injured your ear —

Gianna didn't care about ears, she wanted results. And Warren, sad truth to tell, wanted Gianna. That was the only reason why he had even bothered to return to this place, project diary in hand, just as if he were still the same dutiful, insignificant Warren who'd crept into Dr. Whaley's golden presence a month ago.

"Is Dr. Whaley in?" Warren asked.

The secretary blushed when she recognized him. "Ye — yes, he is. In the building, I mean. He's at a meeting just now. You can wait in his office, if you like, only — only —" She darted her eyes left and right, seeking spies. Finding none, she whispered, "Don't go in there. Not — not yet." The desperate, suppressed passion in her voice made him think of his old cat and the way she used to drag her belly across the floor, before Mom had the poor beast neutered.

Warren watched with a detached and growing horror as the woman dug into one of her file drawers, produced a gigantic Whitman Sampler chocolate assortment, shoved it into his chill hands and begged, "Eat it! Eat it all, and then — then — anything you want, only kiss me!"

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The candy dropped from hands gone numb as he backed away from her. "Please, please," she crooned. "I'm on this new diet — it's actually working, for once — but you have to stay on it for two weeks faithfully and I know that if I don't get a taste of real chocolate — dear God, just one little taste is all! — I'll go off it and be right back where I started. I can't be fat! If I'm fat, I'm nothing. What man would ever look at a woman who's —? Oh, please, if there's one drop of kindness in you —" She began to babble incoherent erotic offers, her fingers fumbling with the buttons of her blouse.

Warren yelped and bolted for the sanctuary of Dr. Whaley's office. He slammed the door behind him.

He heard the secretary fling herself against it, rattling the knob with savage fury. He locked it, dashed through a second door behind the doctor's desk which led to the examining room. There was a piercing reek of alcohol in the white room with its state-of-the-art equipment and glittering, glass-fronted cabinets. It made Warren sniffle a little as he locked that room's other door, the one which led directly to the hallway. He was too rattled to attempt escape by that route — the secretary had a clear view of the hall from her post and might pursue. Better to hole up, go to ground until Dr. Whaley returned.

Warren went back to the office portion of the doctor's suite. Here the air smelled more comfortably of leather-bound books and lemony furniture polish. He dragged a heavy armchair over to the door to brace it further, and tried to feel safe. He could still hear the secretary trying to break through to him. For a while she pounded on the door, but it was made of solid oak. Then her howls and entreaties dwindled to whimpers and moans, her pounding to a pitiable scratching. Eventually, all outside noise stopped. Warren sank into the armchair to await his inevitable rescue.

Rescue, yes, but he had come here for help. Would he get it? From the man whose handy combination woman/trophy he'd purloined? Finally at leisure to think things through, Warren realized that he had been a fool to come cap in hand before the doctor. If he told the truth about what that injection had done to him, what would prevent Dr. Whaley from booting him out, giving himself the injection, and reclaiming Gianna's chocolate devotion?

That's what I'd do, if I were Dr. Whaley, Warren thought bitterly. *The*

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one time, the one lousy time I ever had anything going for me, and I've got to give it up. For once it wasn't them, it was me, my turn. Why does it have to stop so soon! It's not fair!

The scraps of a Sunday-school education blew across Warren's mind with the possibility that perhaps there was some element of Divine Justice in his predicament. Hadn't he promised that if ever Fortune smiled on him, he would use his powers for Good and not for Evil? And had he done so?

"That time Bob called, I wasn't feeling well, I had a headache." He mumbled his excuses in the vague direction of the Deity. "If I get this taste thing back, I'll look him up right away, first thing, make sure Gianna insists they cast him in every video, every commercial, every print ad she ever does."

Apparently God did not find this sufficient, because Warren was moved to add, "And the way I kept making all those models feud over me, once I knew what kind of power I had, the way I played them one against the other, got them into fights, forced them to one-up all those expensive gifts they gave me, well, I — I won't do that anymore." As promises went, that last one sounded pretty lame — as well it might, since achieving Gianna meant that Warren had no further need for toying with her inferiors.

From some dark, neglected niche of his soul, Warren heard a whisper not in words that still managed to convey, *You'd offer Band-Aids to someone fresh off the guillotine, too, wouldn't you! You dabble in stanching symptoms while you drown in the disease.*

The old Warren timorously asked, *What disease!*

The voice merely chose to fill Warren's soul with mirthless laughter. *Oh, Warren, you're just beautiful!*

Warren flung himself away from the little voice, building up a barricade of righteous jabber between them, bribe piled on high-toned moral bribe with no thought to how ridiculous some of them might sound. "And I'll sell the Ferrari and give the money to feed the homeless, and I'll finish writing my dissertation and get on with my life, and I'll travel to South America and chain myself to a rain forest so the lumber companies can't —"

The riotous spate of his pledges to reform abruptly stopped stone dead. A soft hum, now audible since the secretary had ceased her assault on Warren's hideout, drew his attention to the huge mahogany desk. Dr. Whaley had left his computer on and open to the directory.

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Warren couldn't hack his way through a filet mignon with a broadsword, but he was passably computer-literate and Dr. Whaley was not a man of mystery. When you saw a file labeled *Project Taste*, it didn't take a software wizard to hear Opportunity knocking at the door with a battering ram. Clicking in, Warren saw that the file was itself a directory of sorts, a place to record the name of each volunteer followed by a notation indicating the control number of the compound with which he'd been injected. More-detailed information was stowed in the volunteers' files.

The string of numbers after his name was a pixelated Holy Grail for Warren. He crept back into Dr. Whaley's examining room through the connecting door. (Certainly no other! Not with that ravenous secretary still lurking out there.) He knew the room well. He had been here enough times in the past. He knew where Dr. Whaley kept his syringes and in which cabinet the host of tiny, sparkling ampoules waited, row on row, their trim little labels so neatly typed.

Warren could read. Warren could pluck his future out of its numerically ordered place in the cabinet. Warren could even surprise himself by managing to self-administer the injection without fumble or disaster.

"Just this once," he mumbled to whatever Hound of Heaven was still sniffing around the pants leg of his conscience. "Just this once and I'll use the month to make enough money so I'll never have to do a damned thing again in my life ever amen. I'll — I'll — I'll get her to marry me, that's what. Yeah. I'll give her a taste of it like it used to be, then I'll tell her we're through unless she marries me. Prenuptial agreement. Not a loophole big enough for a flea to slip through. Look up a good lawyer. A good *female* lawyer. A good female lawyer on a *diet*, yeah, that's the ticket! That way, when the effect wears off again, she can divorce me if she wants but it's gonna cost her plenty." His hand was shaking as he dabbed himself with alcohol, but the shudders stemmed from maniacal laughter, not fear.

The Hound of Heaven sniffed a little louder and got a spiritual boot in the backside for its pains. A lone warm spark in Warren's soul sighed, *Oh, yes; now you're really one of the beautiful people,* and went out.

It was a simple little dinner à deux in Gianna's penthouse suite. Warren ate steak, Gianna ate lettuce with a chaste squeeze of lemon.

"Why don't you look at me, darling?" he asked.

She smiled down at her plate. "Because if I have to look at someone

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eating something that good, knowing I can't have it, I want to kill him."

"Then I'll hurry," Warren said. His hand scuttled across the Belgian lace tablecloth to cover hers with damp affection. "We both want dessert, don't we?"

He cleared away his plate while she still munched her greens, eyes downcast. She could not help but hear as he thumped his dessert dish onto the tabletop. Her smoky lashes lifted only a little when she did not hear him immediately begin to chew.

"What are you waiting for?" she coaxed. "Do you like to play these cruel games with me?" A testy edge came into her voice as she added, "Or are you only stalling because you no longer can — can —?" She had no adequate way to describe Warren's peculiar gift, or its recent diminution.

Warren chuckled. "Oh, but I *can*. Better than ever. You'll see soon. And afterward — we'll talk." He dipped a finger into the whorls of chocolate sabayon mortaring the layers of the torte before him and let the pale-brown cloud drift just under Gianna's averted eyes before he licked it up. She could not help but see. She could not help but desire. A crystal droplet dewed the leftover curls of arugula on her plate. He couldn't say whether it came from her mouth watering or a tear falling from her eyes.

He didn't much care.

If beauty's power, he thought, *then I guess I finally am one of the beautiful people.*

He gobbled the rest of the torte quickly, took a long drink of water, then said, "Now."

If the dining table had not been solid teak, she would have upended it to reach him. He capered away, belly jiggling, leading her a merry chase that ended in the bedroom.

She gazed at him as he perched demurely on the edge of the bed. There was a wild look in her eye. "Do not torment me, *caro*," she rasped. "I have gained a half a pound this week, longing for you. Now I am condemned to nothing but lettuce, lettuce, lettuce for a month! Can I bear it, having savored you? It will make me mad!" And to tell the truth, she did let out a lycanthropic howl as she launched herself onto Warren's person.

For a last few infuriating instants he kept his lips sealed against hers, enjoying his despotic will more throroughly than any two-year-old. Only when to his mind she had suffered enough did he allow his lips to part.

This is going to be good, he gloated as he felt the touch of her tongue.

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It wasn't good; it was spectacular.

Dr. Whaley cradled a sobbing Gianna against his chest and assured her that the highest-priced, highest-powered lawyer money could buy was on the way. They made a beautiful picture for the newshounds who swarmed over every city murder site like ants over carrion. The doctor whispered helpful hints for his reclaimed ladylove to encourage the photographers to take as many pictures as they liked. The press would remember her cooperation with kindness when this — this unfortunate incident came to trial. The public would remember even more tenderly how fragile, how terrified, how little-girl-lost the lovely Gianna looked in all these photographs. It would take a heart of stone to believe that a child-woman so delicate, so fair, had acted with such nightmarish violence unprovoked.

There would have to be a reason, a major extenuating circumstance for such a sweet blossom to act as Gianna had done. If there were none, one would be invented. The public liked its fairy-tale princesses kept clean and fresh.

Even a princess who kept blubbering the words "Lettuce! Lettuce!" ad infinitum into her comforter's bosom.

"Yes, yes," Dr. Whaley told the reporters. "There was something dreadfully wrong with the man. He was — well, this is off the record, of course —" The reporters nodded, and were sure to get it on the record. "— but in my professional opinion, he was a little unhinged. My secretary will vouch for that. He barged into the building, barricaded himself in my office and injected himself with a compound reserved for the D-series of our research."

Questions were asked, eyebrows raised.

"Of *course* the substance was harmless!" Dr. Whaley snapped. "It didn't make him crazy, if that's what you're implying. He was already a test subject in the *C*-series of experiments we began a month ago." For his own future reference, Dr. Whaley made a mental note that perhaps it might be wise to say nothing of the fact that the C-series and D-series vials (like their predecessors, the A- and B-series) sported identical numbers. Maybe there were better ways to keep the batches straight than by the color of the dot atop each vial. He wondered if his colleages had any suggestions. He would have to ask about that.

"No, I *don't* know what effect the substance would have on a human,"

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he shot back at one particularly picky reporter. "That's why they're called *experiments.* It didn't make the rats we first tested it on go insane or attack perfectly innocent females." Gianna sobbed and shuddered in his arms. "We're doing experiments on the physiology of the human sense of taste, not on inducing psychosis. Even if it did change the way he tasted, how in a sane world could that drive anyone round the bend who wasn't halfway there already?"

Gianna wrenched her artfully tousled head free of Dr. Whaley's embrace and bayed at the ceiling. "Lettuce! Nothing but lettuce! Like eating the same leaf of lettuce over and over, only — only louder! *Louder*! I can still taste it! From his mouth to mine, but stronger, ever stronger! I could not escape it! It filled my mouth, my mind! All the lettuce I have ever had to eat in my life, come back to haunt me, and all because I kissed —!"

Dr. Whaley crammed her mouth back against his shirtfront and offered the media a sickly grin. "Shock. Raving. Doesn't mean a thing. I'll give her a sedative. You know it's been nasty."

No argument there. In fact, it was one veteran newshawk who asked another as they viewed poor Warren's corpse, "You gonna have them run a photo of this?"

"Naaah," said his colleague. "Right through the heart with a salad fork. I guess a woman uses what she's got to protect herself, but still — too grotesque."

"Yeah," the first one agreed. "It's a dirty business, but someone's gotta show a little good taste."

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman achieved cult status with marvelous short stories published all over the science fiction, fantasy and horror fields. She has had two short story collections, Courting Disasters *from Wildside Press, and* Legacy of Fire, *part of Pulphouse Publishing's Author's Choice series. Atheneum just published her first novel, a collaboration with Tad Williams called* Child of an Ancient City. *Her first solo novel,* The Threads that Bind the Bones, *will appear in May from Avon. "While writing 'God Rest Ye Merry, Gentle Ghosts,'" she writes, "I was remembering my two years in the choir of an Episcopal church in a small Oregon coast town. Although our choir director at St. James was different from Ian in the story, he did share Ian's gentle soul."*

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentle Ghosts

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

IAN WAS PLAGUED with the kind of visitors who refused to leave footprints in the snow. This was one of the problems with living in an old parsonage bordering a pioneer cemetery, and working on arranging the church's Christmas music program. Though young himself, Ian liked the older tunes, and most of those carried memories for almost everybody, even people who had died in the previous century.

"I was in the choir here when I was alive," said little Mary Elizabeth, who had died of tubercular consumption in 1862 at the age of eleven. "Before I started coughing so bad. But I don't cough no more. Listen." And she sang in a high, plaintive voice, "O come, o come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. . . ."

Ian took his hands from the keyboard and set them on his thighs as he listened to her achingly pure voice mourning for a people lost in a distant

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land, waiting for the one who would rescue them. He wished he could feature her as a soloist.

"That one was new when I was singing here. I learned it good, didn't I?"

He cleared his throat. "Real good," he said.

"Mama said I sounded just like an angel."

A woman who called herself Dove and wore a dress that covered her ankles but left her shouders bare, and a stylish hat with a feather, would sit on the old pew he had found in the church loft and now used as a bench in his living room. She just wanted to listen, she said. "The music always makes me feel so, sort of, peaceful, don't you know? Didn't get a lot of peace in my lifetime."

And there was the man in leather and furs, with a fur cap and a massive black beard, who spoke only French and wanted to hear tunes Ian didn't know by the names the man called them. Once, Ian was working on a tune, "The Holly and the Ivy," and the man appeared suddenly, frowning, his eyes narrowed, and nodded, shaking a finger at Ian. Ian stopped playing, wondering if he had trespassed on something the man believed sacred. There followed a volley of French that sounded like oaths. The man came over, grabbed Ian's hands, and pushed them down on the keys.

Shaking, Ian played the tune again as best as he could with hands that trembled. He had had no idea that these ghosts could touch him. He could even smell this one, sweat, rancid bear grease, woodsmoke. The Frenchman paced back and forth while Ian played, and when Ian finished, gestured for him to do it again. Fortunately, after half an hour, the ghost was satisfied. Ian was so sick of the tune by then he decided to drop it from the program.

When he started practicing J. S. Bach's "Sleepers, Wake," his room filled with a mismatched choir from a patchwork of times. Mary Elizabeth was there, and so was Dove, who sang alto. Others who had visited him during various songs stood there in varied states of splendor and full voice. Some of them missed words here and there, but all of them were on key, which made him sad, because his own little choir — six volunteers, two of them matrons of later age whose voices wobbled badly on sustained notes and who didn't take direction very well, since they had been singing longer than he had been alive and didn't respect him — had never particularly distinguished itself.

At first, he tried to ignore this new volunteer choir. He practiced, going over passages that gave him technical trouble, and the singers followed

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like sheep, sometimes overshooting when he broke off, but always gamely trying to keep pace. At last, he gave in to temptation and talked with them. "Dynamics, people!" he said. "Soft on the first 'wake,' then louder; you're trying to shake people out of their beds! They're going forth to meet the one they've waited for all their lives. . . ."

Wonder of wonders, they took direction, too. They were a dream choir. He spent the whole night working with them, perfecting "Sleepers Wake" and "What Child Is This?" and "Adeste Fideles," which none of them really knew, since the arrangement he was using came from 1941, too recent for anybody buried in the old cemetery; but they were quick studies, and expressed a liking for the tune. He even departed from the hymnal, trying them out on "Masters in This Hall" and "Down in Yon Forest." They soaked it all up.

As dawn poked fingers of light through his window, he said, "Well, folks —" and they all faded away. He hadn't noticed before, but now he realized they visited only at night.

On Thursday evening, he was in the church, playing the big organ and practicing with his real choir. The tenor, a thin boy who worked as a waiter at an Italian restaurant in town, had sniffles; and one of the basses kept falling asleep. His star, a young soprano who was majoring in music at the university, was in a disputatious mood, quarreling over every suggestion he gave her; and his two older women were as training-proof as ever. After the usual two-hour practice, during which they roughed out the whole Christmas program ("rough" being the operative word), he gave them hot tea and bade them good night. He went home to the parsonage and found his second choir waiting. He had thought himself exhausted from dealing with live people, but again he was seduced by the joy of working with perfect instruments, and spent another sleepless but invigorating night.

As Christmas Eve approached, and the concert with it, the circles under his eyes grew darker, and he worried more and more: his phantom choir was reaching peak perfection (while his live choir continued to resist his every effort to train it), but how could he possibly use his ghost choir at the service? Was that even kosher? How would God view such a thing, dead people singing hymns of praise to the Son of God?

After studying the Scriptures for a while, he thought that perhaps it would be appropriate; in Ezekiel, did not God raise up the Nation of Israel

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from a valley of dry bones? Did not Jesus raise up Lazarus from the dead, and the Centurion's daughter? Hadn't Jesus himself preached and performed miracles after death? These poor souls were awaiting the Resurrection, perhaps; he wasn't sure exactly how things worked after death, being the organist and choir director, not the priest (the priest's family was too big for the parsonage, so they lived a couple of blocks away). But why shouldn't his second choir use its talents to glorify God, even if the members were dead?

On December 23, he rehearsed his live choir in the church during the day, and decided fatalistically that it would do even if the spectral choir could not join it. That night, he asked his phantom choir to come into the church and work with the big organ.

They hesitated in the foyer, on the threshold of the church entry, after he had strolled into the nave. "You've been so close to the church, and you've never been inside?" he asked them.

"Some of us wasn't much welcome in here when we was alive," said Dove.

He went back and reached for her hand, not sure whether he could touch it; but there it was, warm and rough-skinned in his hand. He tugged her over the threshold. She gave a little yelp and stumbled in, then straightened. "Oh!" she said, surprised. The others followed.

They took up the two whole front pews: explorers, miners, trappers, boatmen, mothers, children, fallen women, laundresses, a barber, merchants, and military men. He went up on the dais in front and turned on the organ, then looked at his choir.

They seemed afraid. He smiled at them, raised his hand in the steady palm-up gesture that meant "Get to your feet," and they rose. As soon as they began "Sleepers, Wake," they lost their fear.

They remembered every change in dynamics he had told them, took every breath on time without interrupting the tunes, and each voice was perfectly on pitch. This was music the way God meant it to be, he thought, then wondered if that was sacrilegious. But it was so glorious! Surely if the congregation could hear it, they would understand the meaning of Christmas, with or without the sermon. He *must* have this choir working with him tomorrow!

"Tell you what," he said, "why don't you go up in the loft, and we'll try it from there?" The loft was from the church's glory days, when the

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congregation had swelled to several hundred and there had been thirty or more in the choir. The old pump organ was still up there, dusty and falling to pieces.

His choir found the stair to the loft and trooped up there, and indeed, from there the music sounded beautiful. When they had run through the whole program without flaw, he went and stood in the center aisle, looking up at them. "You are wonderful! You have been a joy to work with, whatever else comes of this. I wish you were my regular choir."

They smiled down at him.

"I have a question for you," he said.

"What is it?" asked Mary Elizabeth, standing proud in the front row.

"Can you become invisible?"

They began talking among themselves. It didn't sound as if they knew.

"Oh, sure, simple enough," Dove said, cutting off a metaphysical discussion between a lawyer and a logger. "It's that I-am-eyes-only feeling you get when you're drifting at twilight." She vanished.

"Oh," said some of the others. Presently, they had all vanished except for Mary Elizabeth. "I don't think I can," she said, looking ready to cry.

"That's all right, Mary Elizabeth," said Ian. "If everybody else can do it, I think it's O.K. for you to be visible."

She beamed.

"Now, everybody, I would love to have you at the service tomorrow night, if possible. Can you find your places up there, and sit quietly during the rest of the service?"

They popped back into view and nodded to him.

"As long as you're up there, perhaps the congregation will think it's themselves singing so beautifully. For tonight, you're all dismissed. Thanks."

HE PLACED bulletins for the evening service in the choir loft, spaced in the old pews that were left after he borrowed the one in his living room. He thought for a while, wondering if the ghosts could wield hymnals and prayer books, then decided to put them in the loft just in case. The church didn't have the congregation to need these books anyway.

"What are you doing up there, Ian?" asked Father Woodruff from below. The altar guild had come in while Ian wasn't watching, and they were

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setting up fresh-cut evergreen boughs and candelabra along the aisle.

"What?" said Ian, coming to the front of the loft.

"I said, what are you doing up there? Are you going to exile the choir up there after all those sour notes last Sunday?"

"Oh no, Father! No, I couldn't. We depend on those people."

Father Woodruff gave him a smile. "I was just kidding."

"Oh." Ian bit his lip. Then he raced down the stairs and went to the Father. "I have some other singers who've volunteered to join us for the service," he said. "At least, they want to come. I'm not sure they'll be able to, but they might, so I'm setting up for them."

"From out of town, are they?"

"Oh no, from right here."

Father Woodruff patted his shoulder. "You dug up some other singers from right here?" he said. "From the high school?" Ian worked with the high school theater department when they put on musicals.

"No, Father. I just wanted to tell you. I didn't want to, uh, surprise you."

"Why not? I'd be surprised to see more than thirty people here tonight, including the altar guild, the choir, the acolytes, and my family. Surprised and happy. Go ahead, Ian, surprise me."

"I'll do my best, Father."

The church smelled of melting candle wax, fresh cedar and pine, and perfumes. Ian sat at the big organ, watching the congregation trickle in, glancing now and then at the loft — no sign of his second choir. He played some Bach. This was his favorite night at church: all the light for the service came from candles, which made it hard to breathe after an hour or so, but it was lovely. People brought an air of happy expectation with them tonight, and they would celebrate the birth of Christ, the most joyous event in the church year.

Presently, he saw Father Woodruff, the choir, and the acolytes out in the foyer, lighting candles and saying a brief prayer. He opened his hymnal to the processional, "Sleepers, Wake," and when he got the nod from one of his choir matrons, he began the introductory instrumental verse. The congregation got to its feet.

Once through, and the nod to the Father, his choir, and —

Mary Elizabeth was standing in the loft, dancing with impatience and delight.

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Ian beamed at the near-empty loft as invisible throats opened and voices poured out: "Wake, awake, for night is flying! The watchmen on the heights are crying, Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"

As one, the congregation turned and stared up at the loft. Father Woodruff was smiling wide, as acolytes bearing lighted candles and a cross preceded him up the aisle, the choir following him. The Father was in good voice tonight. Ian knew he loved to sing. As the Father proceeded, though, and saw his flock still staring up at the loft, he, too, turned and looked up to behold a single small girl in the midst of a flood of golden voices. For a moment, his voice faltered, but then he nodded and forged ahead with the processional. The live choir went to stand in its pew beside the organ, still singing. Tony, the waiter-tenor, had finally succumbed to a full-blown case of flu and was missing tonight. One of Ian's matrons was belting out her part. The soprano was moving her mouth and staring at Ian. He smiled at her. She looked toward the loft, her eyes wide, then stared at Ian again. He shrugged and continued to play.

Before they were midway through the third and last verse, Father Woodruff came to stand beside Ian's bench, and muttered, "You surprised me, all right. Is it a phonograph?"

"No," muttered Ian.

"What, then?"

Ian looked up at the loft, where his glorious singers were, putting hearts and souls into their voices, bringing the song alive in a way he had heard in dreams, but had never thought to hear in life. "Angels," he said, and played Amen.

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Marina Fitch returns to these pages with a story originally written for a Christmas Eve celebration. The celebration was done in traditional fashion: ghost stories shared before a roaring fire, mulled cider and baked goods on the side. Marina lives in Santa Cruz, California. She is writing her second novel while marketing her first.

The Ghosts on Christmas Eaves

By Marina Fitch

ALISON'S BREATH snuffled wetly against the window. I nestled my eggnog into the cotton snow on the fireplace mantel, then knelt behind my daughter on Mom's plump sofa. I braided her brown hair loosely, wondering why she'd stopped going over her Christmas list. Anyone listening to Alison would think God created Christmas to reward all the manufacturers who had been so good all year.

"What's so interesting, Al?" I asked.

Alison shrugged in the exaggerated, dramatic way of five-year-olds and pulled her face from the glass with a slight pop. "The lights," she said. "They're so precious!"

"Precious" was her new word. She didn't get it from me. I considered washing her mouth out with soap but doubted that would get the cloying,

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saccharine taste out of my own.

I reached for the eggnog. "That's nice."

"What's she looking at, Susan?" my mother said. "She looks so precious."

I groaned.

Mom turned to me. "Susan, is that your stomach? You know, there's still plenty of food left." She gestured absently toward the walnut sideboard against the far wall. The sideboard all but buckled under heaps of red-and-green food — pickles, pimentoed olives, stuffed tomatoes, pesto, cinnamon applesauce, tossed salad. Even the liquor bottles wore bands of green-and-red construction paper. Mom gets downright *precious* during the Christmas season.

"Alison, darling," Mom said, "what are —"

"Where d'you want this tree dumped, lady?" my father said, clumping into the room. Behind him the Christmas tree wobbled into view, nose first like a guided missile. Somewhere in the bushy hind branches resounded muffled ouches and damns — my husband, Phil.

Mom directed them, with much hand waving, to place the Douglas fir on the side of the sofa away from the fireplace. Alison glanced at the tree, then peered out the window once more. Dad, noting his granddaughter's lack of interest, turned to me. "What's so gut-wrenchingly amazing out there?" he asked, tugging at the fingers of his right glove.

"The lights on the Rowan house," Alison said.

Dad's hands fell to his sides. "There are no lights on the Rowans' house."

My stomach knotted. "She must mean the Arhoolies or the Gizdiches."

"Norma hasn't lived there since the top story burned down in August," Mom said.

"I know," I said. "How is Norma? Is she still living at the home?"

"Yes," Mom said. "She's responding well to art therapy."

"Responding *well*?" Dad rolled his eyes. "She's making ceramic houses and ripping off the roofs. She sent us one for Thanksgiving."

"Harvey, the Rowans lived in that house for thirty-three years."

Dad crossed his arms over his chest. "*Norma* lived in that house for thirty-three years."

Mom nodded sadly. "Yes, well."

"Can I put this fuc — uh, this tree down?" Phil asked.

Dad helped him. Mom and I joined Alison on the sofa. Mom stroked

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Alison's hair. "She must mean the Gizdiches," Mom said. "I saw Katie putting up lights this — my God!"

Alison said Rowan and she meant Rowan. I grasped the window ledge, knocking a Christmas card to the floor, and pulled myself closer. Across the street, between the Gizdiches and the Arhoolies, the Rowan house glittered like an electric snowflake caught in a rainbow. A net of lights draped the front of the house: a green-and-blue six-pointed star of twinkling bulbs set among a field of static red lights and bordered with yellow bulbs. Three white lights shone at the very center. It was the traditional Rowan pattern.

"It's so beautiful," I murmured.

Mom made a choking sound.

"I didn't know Norma rebuilt —" I gasped. The lights hung suspended across the emptiness where the second story used to be.

"They always turned their Christmas lights on five days before Christmas," Mom said in a hushed voice.

I imagined a calendar in my head. It was the twentieth. "This is a mass hallucination, right?" I said. "What'd you put in the pesto?"

Mom straightened. "So I tried something a little different once. *Once.* Do you really think I'd risk having your father paint his nose red and go caroling wearing coat-hanger antlers again?"

I glanced at the lights. "It's a practical joke, it has to be. They're suspended on fishing line or something. Someone who knows the whole routine is just being weird."

"Practical joke or not, I'm calling the police." She marched toward the phone.

A patrol car pulled up outside. "Don't bother, Mom," I said. "Somebody already did."

She hurried back to the window, jostling into place beside me. Across the street, Tim Arhoolie met the two cops as they stepped from the patrol car. He tugged at the cuff of his red watchman's cap with his right hand, waving frantically at the Rowan house with his left. The officers listened, nodded, looked at the house, turned to Tim again. Tim shook his head, then slid his hands into the back pockets of his slacks, his gray-bearded chin thrust forward. One of the cops reached for his flashlight. The other reached for her gun.

They strode purposefully up the driveway.

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I slid my arms protectively around Alison. "Honey, let's decorate the tree now," I said, lifting her from the sofa.

"But Mommy!" she said.

My mother hovered near the window. I touched her shoulder. "Mom, the police will take care of it."

"Yes, well," she said. She didn't sound convinced, but she wasn't about to rush out and offer assistance either.

Instead she slipped five CDs in the player. Dad and Phil chattered around the carols, teasing Alison and holding up each ornament for her approval. Mom and I gazed at each other between the branches. At one point she stooped for another ornament, then rose slowly. She handed me a beadwork bauble, a miniature of the Rowans' lights. We both glanced toward the window, then I stared at the ornament in my hand. Norma made it for me after I gushed that their lights were the best in the whole town. I wondered if I'd used the word "precious."

Alison shrieked and rushed up to me. "Oh, Mommy, look! It's a dinosaur Santa with a pipe! Isn't it —"

"Not a dinosaur, honey," I said. "An iguana."

I looked dubiously from the iguana to the stuffed frog with wings mounted to the top of the tree. I leaned over to Mom. "Those things are hideous. Why don't you get rid of them?"

Her eyes teared up. She smiled. "You gave them to me when you were seven. Picked them out yourself. You were such a dear."

I grimaced, then wondered what endearing things Alison would give me. I picked up a traditional glass ball with a satin matte finish. I stroked the red glass, then set it down and walked to the window. Tim Arhoolie still guarded the empty patrol car. With a shudder, I returned to the tree.

Joan Baez warbled carols. Mom went to the window, pretending to decorate the curtains with fake holly and silver bells.

Alison began her litany of greed again. "And Santa's going to bring a bike and a Leggoland and —"

I glared at her. "Alison, that's not what Christmas is about. Christmas is about being together —"

Mom grabbed my sleeve. "They're gone!" she whispered.

"The cops? Are the lights still on?"

"Lights are still on." Mom peered across the street. "And Tim Arhoolie is still out there. He's talking to Katie."

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I rushed out of the room, grabbing my jacket as I rocketed out the front door. I heard Katie's door thump shut. Tim stood alone in the Rowan driveway, his cap pulled down to meet his eyebrows.

I hurried to join him, forcing my arm through my twisted sleeve. "Tim!"

"Hey," he said. He nodded toward the Rowans'. "Damnedest thing. 'Lectricity been turned off since August."

We stared at the lights a moment in silence. Tim tugged at his cap. "Not a soul been in there since then neither."

"What did the cops say?"

"First they thought it was a practical joke, same as me. Figured some nutcase wanted to spook the neighborhood. But them cops come out saying no one in there, no 'lectricity, no nothing. They stood on the last of the staircase and stared up at a canopy of lights shining without benefit of cords or plugs."

My heart pounded in my constricted chest. "Do they have any ideas?"

"Ghost lights."

"*Ghost* lights? Tim, that's crazy! They must have some idea."

"Not a one. Said 'less someone gets hurt, not a lot they can do. Got more burglaries and drunks than the force can handle, got no time for ghost lights."

I stared at the green-and-blue star.

Tim narrowed his eyes, the cap threatening to slide down and cover them. "Always hated those lights."

"But they're so beautiful!"

"Ah!" He spat. "Suzy, those damn bulbs light up our place like daybreak. Got to pull the drapes and nail towels over the windows to get any sleep." He turned to me and smiled suddenly. "Ah, well. Pretty kindly as ghosts go. Time to turn in."

"Right," I said. "Merry Christmas, Tim."

Mom ambushed me the second I stepped across the threshhold. In a low voice, I repeated what Tim said.

She gaped at me. "That's all the cops said?"

"You want to know more, *you* go over there."

Mom paled. "Let's finish decorating."

The clock gonged quarter to ten as we reentered the living room. I caught Mom's gaze. We both glanced at the window.

"Nearly done," Dad said, handing me a present. While Phil rounded up

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Alison's jacket, mittens and missing reindeer slipper, I helped Dad shove gifts under the lower branches.

My mother edged closer to the window.

As soon as Phil bundled her up, Alison waddled over to the couch to join her grandmother, her jacket-padded arms unable to rest at her sides. Phil followed her, inspecting her knit cap. He looked up at me. "Ready? We need to get Squirt home to bed."

I glanced at the clock: 9:58. "Yeah, um, Mom?" I stalled. "What should we bring Christmas Eve?"

With her arm around Alison's shoulders, Mom stared out the window. "Oh, I don't know. Pickles?"

I stepped up beside her, my gaze fixed on the star's white center. "Pickles," I said. "Dill, sweet? Maybe I should bring watermelon pickles."

"Susan," Phil said through gritted teeth. "It's past *somebody's* bedtime. I really think we should be —"

"There!" Mom shouted as the lights winked out. "Ten o'clock — exactly!"

"Same as always," I said. I studied the sudden darkness that engulfed the Rowans' house. In the glow of the streetlamp and the neighboring Christmas lights, the outline of the house jutted like a broken grin.

With a snort of disdain, my father joined us at the window. "Lights on the Rowans' house?"

"You missed them," Mom said. "It's after ten."

"Well," Dad said, "I guess I'll just have to wait till tomorrow."

Phil glared at me. "Susan —"

"I'm coming."

Alison turned and wriggled into her grandmother's arms. "Can I open one now? I've been good."

"No, honey," I said, scooping her up before she scored a direct hit on Mom's grandma button. "On Christmas Eve. Now kiss Grandma good-bye."

As Phil tightened Alison's seat belt, I stared at the ruined house. No cords wove and crisscrossed the gaping hole or hung from the seared timbers. The house's only color came from the reflection of the Arhoolies' lights on the smoke-stained white sofa that squatted on the remains of the upper floor. I hunched deeper into my parka as we pulled away from the curb.

I stared at the phone in my hand before returning it to my ear. "Mom,

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you're not serious."

"That's what Christmas is all about," my mother said. "Caring and sharing."

My mom, greeting-card philosopher. "The lights were on again last night, weren't they?" I said, tracing the message pad on the kitchen wall with my finger.

"Well . . . yes. Your father called the police this time." She paused. "And I dreamed about her."

"You dreamed about Norma Rowan?"

"Yes, and she kept crying and saying she had no one to be with at Christmas. I had to invite her."

"I guess I better bring extra pickles," I muttered.

"What, dear?"

"Nothing. We'll see you Christmas Eve."

I hung up and turned away from the wall to face my family at the kitchen table. Alison had glued stickers to her father. She giggled. "Look, Mommy, I wrapped Daddy."

I smiled. "You sure did, sweetheart. Who you gonna give him to?"

"Santa Fred. The one with the bell."

"Oh, good choice." I looked at Phil. "You're being donated to charity. And speaking of charity, Mom's invited Norma Rowan for Christmas."

Alison slipped from the table. "I need to tell Molly what Santa's bringing us for Christmas," she said, darting from the room.

"Norma?" Phil frowned. "The one with the phantom lights?"

I nodded. "Mom convinced Norma's second cousin to sign Norma out of the nursing home for the night so she can come be with us."

"Norma's married, isn't she?"

"Was. To Carl."

"Oh, right. The guy who farmed earthworms."

"He only did that for a couple of years."

Phil shook his head. "Yeah, then he milked black widows."

I pulled a sticker from his arm: a cat wearing a holly wreath. "He'd always wanted to be a rancher," I said.

Phil rubbed the newly bald spot on his arm. "So where is he now?"

"He died. His prize spider turned on him."

"Oh. They had kids, didn't they?"

"Used to. Laurel and Eric. Eric died. He used to run across the tracks

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trying to beat the trains."

"Hit by a train?"

"No, a car."

"A car?"

"The driver was trying to beat the train, too."

Phil winced. "Great."

I sat back defensively. "Well, he might have made it if he hadn't found the spider in his pocket."

Phil frowned. "I'm not sure I want Alison around this family."

Alison reappeared in a sulk. Her stuffed moose trailed behind her like a flag of defeat. "Molly won't talk to me. She says I didn't get her enough presents."

Phil picked up the stuffed moose and looked it in the eye. "What gives, Molly? Why are you being such a brat?"

With an exasperated sigh, Alison rolled her eyes. People always said she resembled my father. "Daddy, you're not supposed to say that. You're supposed to say, 'Why are you doing bratty behavior?'"

"Oh." He shook the moose. "Straighten up, Moll."

Alison reached for the stuffed animal and cuddled it. "He's a dear, but he doesn't know what he's doing sometimes," she confided to the moose as she left the kitchen.

"Doesn't she have any other family she can stay with?"

"We could send her to your sister's."

"Not Alison. *Norma*."

"Her second cousin says she's too crazy."

"Yeah, but what about the rest of the family?"

"I don't. . . ." I thought a minute. "Norma's sister died. She got bit by a rabid bat — she was petting it. She thought it was the neighbor's cat. And her husband, let's see . . . he fell off the roof trying to hose the thing off of her."

"From the roof?"

"Better angle, he said." I pursed my lips. "Broke his neck. Then, let's see. . . . Norma's brother choked to death on a Girl Scout cookie, Carl's sister and her husband didn't pull their chutes in time while sky-diving —"

"Both of them?"

"The minister said, 'You may now kiss the bride,' and I guess they got a

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little carried away. Then, when Norma's mother was ninety-six, she died in a skateboarding accident. . . ."

"Don't tell me — she was riding it."

"Ye-es." I shrugged. "Anyway, that leaves Norma and her daughter. Laurel gave up the outside world to join a religious commune. Their big thing is living in this cave without light. I think it's supposed to bring them closer to God. Anyway, no one's heard from her in years."

"Shit."

"I guess," I said. "Norma laughs about it all. She says, 'It's simply too absurd to be tragic.'"

Phil shook his head. "Ho ho ho," he muttered.

WE ARRIVED at my folks' at five on Christmas Eve. Phil and Alison went inside, Phil weighted down with overnight cases and pillows, Alison hugging Molly. I turned to face the Rowans'. The house shone cheerily under the sparkling lights. The star blinked once then blazed on. I hurried to join my family.

Mom met me at the door. "Christmas Eve — the lights will be on all night," she whispered.

I nodded. That was another Rowan tradition. I lowered my voice. "How is Norma?"

Mom gave me a strange look and herded me into the living room. Seated sideways on the couch, ankles crossed under her calf-length red skirt, Norma gazed out the window at the remains of her house. A bit of color reflected in her face, giving her pale, bulbous features a blush of blue and green. As if set on delay, she gazed a quarter of a minute longer, then turned to smile at me.

"As I live and breathe!" she said. "Aren't those lights simply *grand*?"

Alison crawled up next to Norma and handed her a cookie. Bending over, Alison retrieved Molly from the foot of the sofa. She cradled the moose in her arms. "She used to live there," Alison told Molly, grasping the top of the moose's head and turning it toward the window.

"Yes, I did, child," Norma said, "and what Christmases we'd have! The entire family would show up on Christmas Eve, just everyone. That's when we celebrated. We always had a lovely roast goose —"

Alison clutched Molly tighter, as if Norma had said "moose" not "goose." Her little mouth twisted. "You mean goose, like Mother Goose?"

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Norma whooped with laughter. "As I live and breathe! Aren't you an angel? No, my darling, a big barrel-chested gander like the ones at Royal Street Park. We'd clean him and stuff him full of bread crumbs and dried apricots and figs and spices! My land, what a feast!"

Alison nodded gravely. Phil came in from behind me and put an arm around me. He queried me with a look.

"And were there lots of presents?" Alison asked.

I scowled. Maybe this year Alison needed to get coal in her stocking.

Norma simply turned toward the house once more, oblivious to Alison's question. "We never ate until everyone was there. We always ate latish on Christmas Eve. Around eight or nine. 'Spanish-style,' Carl used to say."

"Dinner's ready," Mom called. "Phil, will you help Norma to the table?"

Despite my apprehensions — despite *everyone's* apprehensions — dinner went smoothly. No one asked Norma what she thought of the ghost lights, we just let her rattle on gaily about past Christmases, those who couldn't be here — for whatever reason — and the wonder of the season. "And the lights!" Norma said, waving a spoonful of mashed potatoes. "Oh, it just wouldn't be Christmas without the lights! Carl puts them up for me every year. He's got such a brilliant touch when it comes to lights."

She turned to Alison, who was seated beside her. Norma's nose almost touched that of the moose. "Aren't they beautiful?" she said. "My lovely Christmas star, the beacon that calls my family home."

Dad's head jerked upright. "What fam —"

I set my water glass down with a thump. My mother dropped her fork. Dad excused himself and disappeared into the kitchen. I heard the unmistakable creak of the door to the liquor cupboard followed by the gush of the tap. Phil looked at Alison, half-rising as if to scoop her up and rescue her. Staring up at Norma, Alison's face lit up with a smile. "Molly thinks that's precious," she said.

Somehow we managed to choke down the rest of the meal. Norma helped Mom clean up in the kitchen while Phil and I got Alison ready for bed. Clad in her lion-and-tiger pajamas, Alison padded into the kitchen to prepare Santa's snack.

Mom picked her up and set her on the counter. "Here, let Grandma get the cookie jar for you —"

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"No." Alison shook her head, her face stern. "Santa gets cookies from everybody. I want to leave something good for him. I'm going to make him a peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich and a Diet Coke."

I stifled a groan. I'd lost the toss with Phil. *I* had to eat the sandwich.

Norma laughed. "We always left Santa a plate of sauerkraut and liverwurst," she said.

Suddenly the peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich didn't sound so bad.

Alison set the plate on the mantel, then said good night to everyone. Before I led her to her little cot at the foot of our bed, she rushed back to Norma and threw her arms around her. "Have a good Christmas," she said.

"Honey, Norma's having Christmas, with us," Mom said.

Alison gave Norma a resounding smack on the cheek. Norma cupped Alison's chin in her hand. "I will, dear, I will."

When I returned from tucking Alison in, silence had descended on the living room. Norma had returned to her post at the window; Mom, Dad and Phil sat in the rockers and armchair, their faces bewildered and taut. I sank into the only available seat — on the sofa next to Norma — and glanced at each of them in turn. Phil shrugged.

We sat in silence for about ten minutes. Then Mom said, "How about a little Christmas music?" Without waiting for a response, she hopped up and slipped Emmylou Harris into the CD player. Still no one spoke, but at least we had a sound track.

After a while, Norma turned around to glance at the clock. "Quarter to nine," she said in a voice so sad it broke my heart. I reached over to touch her knee. She looked at me, her face crumpled with grief. She turned back to the window.

"Norma —," I said.

Suddenly her face lit up brighter than the lights that sparkled over her ruined house. She clapped her hands. "There he is!" she said. "It's time!"

I peered out the window and started. Carl Rowan stood on the steps of their house, bathed in the glow of the Christmas lights. He waved to Norma, then gestured for her to come, to come. Norma blew him a kiss; he pretended to catch it, lowering his clenched hand to his heart. Norma jumped up from the sofa and hurried toward the door. "Merry Christmas!" she said. "God bless you!"

Mom rose as if to follow her, but Dad grabbed her wrist. The front door

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banged shut. Mom swung toward me. I cleared my throat, but my voice was a mere scratch. "Carl," I said.

"But Carl's dead. . . ." Mom snapped her wrist out of Dad's hand and rushed up to join me at the window. Soon Phil and Dad pressed up behind us.

Outside, Norma darted up the walk into Carl's waiting arms. He swept her off her feet and spun her, then set her down. Arm in arm, they walked into the house. The downstairs windows filled with light as they stepped over the threshold. Carl shut the door behind them.

Dad shivered, his teeth rattling. "My God —"

"Look!" Mom cried, and pointed.

As if a door had opened in the night, Norma's sister stepped suddenly onto the walkway, followed by her husband. Both looked remarkably healthy, but I guess dying of rabies and a broken neck isn't really that disfiguring. The couple turned to wait for someone: Norma's mother. The older woman walked slowly, her body sagging with relief as the younger couple hooked elbows with her. The door of the house opened and Norma welcomed them in.

Out of the darkness stepped Norma's brother, equally hale for a dead person, sprig of holly pinned to his red vest, then Carl's sister and her husband. "Criminy," Dad said. "You'd think there wouldn't be enough of *them* to put in a Baggie."

"The sky divers," I said to Phil.

I stared hard at the couple. They snuggled each other and laughed. I relaxed my grip on the windowsill. If they looked this good, Eric would be easy. I'd been dreading his splattered skull.

And sure enough, Eric came next, waving his arms above his head and dancing on the walkway like he'd just made a touchdown. He bolted past his aunt and her husband, nearly tackling Norma as he shoved her backward into the house.

"The whole family, home for Christmas," Mom said.

"Not quite," Dad said.

We all pressed against the glass just as Laurel Rowan stepped from the door of night. Norma ran to greet her daugher and pull her into the house.

"I guess Laurel took a wrong turn in one of those caves," I said.

Norma and Laurel embraced, then Norma pulled the door shut. We let out a collective breath, waiting, but the lights did not wink out.

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We stared in silence for what seemed hours, then Dad said, "Someone needs to go get her."

"*I'm* not going over there," Mom said. "I have no intention of joining a bunch of ghosts over roast goose."

Dad dragged a present out from under the tree and tore away the paper. It was a flashlight. "For your car," he told Mom. "Merry Christmas. Look, if someone doesn't do something that woman's a goner."

"Harvey," Mom said, "just because Norma's spending Christmas with the dead is no reason to believe *she's* going to die."

Dad snorted. "There's no electricity, no gas, no nothing at that damn house. You really think she's going to survive the night?"

"It's only thirty degrees out there," Phil said

Dad opened the coat closet. I'm going over there and bring her back."

"Why don't you call the police and make *them* bring her back?" Mom said.

"Call if you want to, but this is one of the busiest nights of the year for cops," Dad said, pulling on his coat. "Besides, you can't file a missing nutcase report for at least twenty-four hours."

I grabbed my jacket. "I'm coming with you, Dad."

Mom sank into the sofa. Phil opened his mouth, but I interrupted him. "You better stay with Mom."

He nodded.

"And keep an eye on the Rowans'," Dad said.

Dad and I strode across the street. We knocked on the Rowans' door, leaning forward to peer through the pebbled glass. Dad rattled the knob, then backed up and launched himself at the front door. The thud echoed through the house, but the door held fast. I tugged him away. Wading through the knee-high junipers, we stopped in front of the living room window and peered inside. The inside lights no longer blazed as they had earlier; the only illumination came from the glow of the Christmas star.

I shivered. The room was empty.

"Dad—"

"I'm going in," he said, wading back to the front door.

He elbowed the pebbled glass, shattering it, then reached in and popped the lock. The door swung open. Light filtered through the holes in the charred ceiling, splashing color across the smoke-stained walls and broken plaster. We grabbed each other's hands. "Looks like ghouls' night

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at the disco," Dad said.

We ventured into the living room. "Norma?" Dad called.

No one answered.

We crept through the house, room by room, peeking behind the last remnants of a home — a mildewed sofa, a green armchair I remembered as beige, and a china cabinet that displayed shattered dishes. We balked at the top of the stairs, leaning against each other as the unsecured bulbs massed above us like stars in the heart of a wilderness sky. Backing down the stairs cautiously, we suddenly let go of each other and ran.

Out on the Rowans' walkway we stopped and gasped for breath. "You go check the backyard," I said. "I'll check the side of the house."

"No," Dad said. "*We'll* check the backyard and *we'll* check the side of the house."

We did. No Norma.

I shook my head as we walked back to our house. "Where do you think she went?"

"I don't know," Dad said, opening the front door. "But she's not coming back tonight. Maybe next year when the ghost of Christmas past decides to light up the neighborhood again."

Mom rushed to meet us. "The police won't come. They said they're tired of crank calls about that house."

My father rolled his eyes. "Crank calls? A woman steps into the Twilight Zone and that's a crank call?"

Mom shrugged helplessly.

I joined Phil at the window. "Did anyone leave the Rowans'?" I asked.

"Not a soul." He winced. "Sorry."

None of us knew quite what to do. Phil and I forced ourselves into Santa mode. We assembled Alison's purple bicycle twice — once incorrectly, once *almost* correctly — while Mom and Dad argued about whether to leave the porch light on. Dad finally conceded but that wasn't enough for Mom. She dragged a chair and a blanket into the entry.

Dad followed her. "What are you doing?"

I peeked around the doorframe. Wrapped in the blanket, Mom sat facing the door. "I won't be able to sleep anyway," Mom said. "I'm waiting up for Norma."

Dad threw up his hands. A minute later, *he* returned with a chair and a blanket. He settled down next to her. Mom patted his hand. He glared at her.

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"Reminds me of our first date," Phil said, coming up behind me. He had removed the handlebars for the third time. "Susan, does Alison really need these things?"

"This is stupid," my father muttered.

"Do you want me to wait up with you?" I asked.

Mom shook her head. "No, dear, try to get some sleep. If Alison wakes up and the two of you aren't there, she might get scared."

"Good point," I said.

Phil and I finished our Santa-ing for the year, then I choked down the sandwich. I stood over Alison's cot for a long time until Phil coaxed me to bed. I listened for Norma until I fell asleep.

When I dragged my head from under the pillow next morning and squinted at the clock, it was 7:05. I sat bolt upright. The house was silent and Alison's cot was empty.

Frantic, I grasped Phil's shoulders and shook him awake. "Where's Alison?"

"Maybe she's under the tree playing with her presents."

I ripped the covers from the bed and snatched at my sweats. I took a deep breath to calm myself; let it be greed that had my daughter, not ghosts. "I made her promise to wake us before she went into the living room."

"Five-year-olds don't make promises," he mumbled, searching for the jettisoned blankets. "Susan, it's cold in here."

I jogged down the hallway. Maybe Phil was right. Maybe the excitement was too much for her. She was, after all, a second-generation boob-tube baby. Nothing like a little media-induced greed to get the old blood flowing in the morning. Racing to the living room, I slowed as I passed the entry. Head to head, Mom and Dad slumped against each other, sound asleep. I hurried into the living room, stopping just inside the door. I took a deep breath . . .

. . . and saw Alison curled up beside Norma on the couch, Molly scrunched between them. Norma's whole body seemed relaxed, suffused with calm. She gazed down at Alison, her hand resting on Molly's nose. "And after we finished reading the Christmas story, we sang 'Joy to the World,'" she told my rapt daughter, "and blew the candles out."

"And then?" Alison said.

"And then they were gone."

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"What about the presents?"

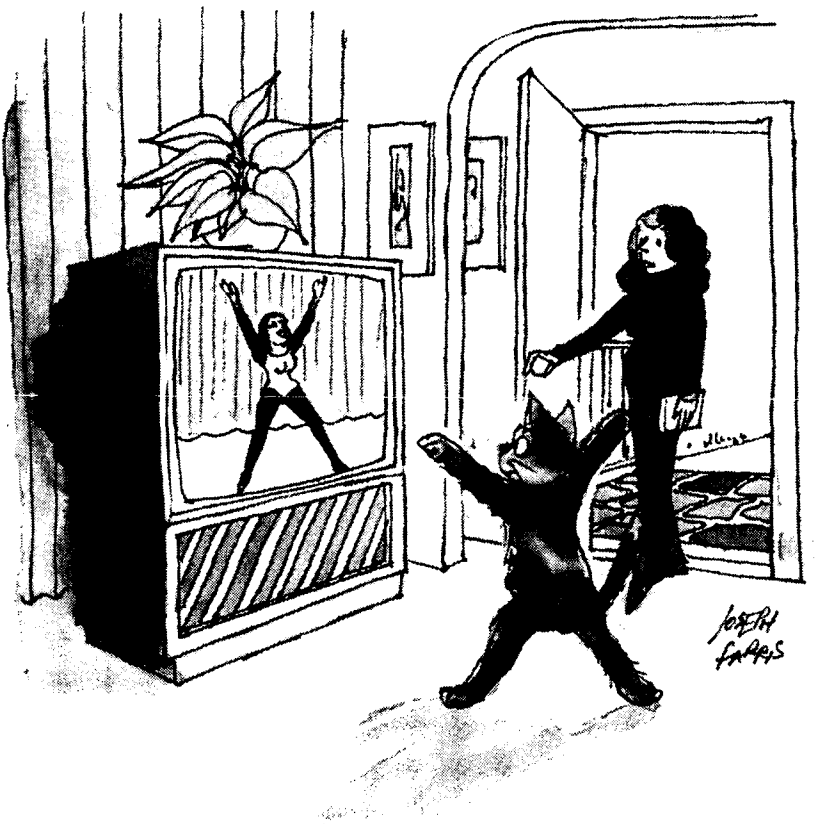
"As I live and breathe!" Norma laughed. "There were no presents! You silly monkey, there's no place to buy presents in the afterlife."

"Oh." Alison's face puckered thoughtfully. "They could've made some."

"I didn't want presents and *they* didn't need them," Norma said, gazing out the window. "It was the best Christmas, the very best. We were all together, the whole family, and that was gift enough."

Alison's face cleared. She smiled, hugging Molly tight. "Grandma says that having me and Molly and Mommy and Dad here is enough," she said.

As I knelt down beside them, I took Norma's warm, solid hand. And I didn't flinch or gag when Alison added, "What a precious Christmas we're having! It's gut-drenchingly amazing!"



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Jack Cady has written a number of novels. His short fiction has appeared in Omni, Pulphouse, *and* Final Shadows, *as well as in many mainstream publications. Broken Moon Press has brought out a collection of his stories called* The Sons of Noah. *"The Night We Buried Road Dog" is a classic novella — in any genre. On the strength of this piece, Jack won a National Endowment for the Arts grant which, I hope, will give him time to write many more fine short stories.*

The Night We Buried Road Dog

By Jack Cady

I.

BROTHER JESSE BURIED his '47 Hudson back in '61, and the roads got just that much more lonesome. Highway 2 across north Montana still wailed with engines as reservation cars blew past; and it lay like a tunnel of darkness before headlights of big rigs. Tandems pounded, and the smart crack of downshifts rapped across grassland as trucks swept past the bars at every crossroad. The state put up metal crosses to mark the sites of fatal accidents. Around the bars, those crosses sprouted like thickets.

That Hudson was named Miss Molly, and it logged 220,000 miles while never burning a clutch. Through the years, it wore into the respectable look that comes to old machinery. It was rough as a cob, cracked glass on one

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side, and primer over dents. It had the tough-and-ready look of a hunting hound about its business. I was a good deal younger then, but not so young that I was fearless. The burial had something to do with mystery, and Brother Jesse did his burying at midnight.

Through fluke or foresight, Brother Jesse had got hold of eighty acres of rangeland that wasn't worth a shake. There wasn't enough of it to run stock, and you couldn't raise anything on it except a little hell. Jesse stuck an old house trailer out there, stacked hay around it for insulation in Montana winters, and hauled in just enough water to suit him. By the time his Hudson died, he was ready to go into trade.

"Jed," he told me the night of the burial, "I'm gonna make myself some history, despite this damn Democrat administration." Over beside the house trailer, the Hudson sat looking like it was about ready to get off the mark in a road race, but the poor thing was a goner. Moonlight sprang from between spring clouds, and to the westward the peaks of mountains glowed from snow and moonlight. Along Highway 2, some hot rock wound second gear on an old flathead Ford. You could hear the valves begin to float.

"Some little darlin' done stepped on that boy's balls," Jesse said about the driver. "I reckon that's why he's looking for a ditch." Jesse sighed and sounded sad. "At least we got a nice night. I couldn't stand a winter funeral."

"Road Dog?" I said about the driver of the Ford, which shows just how young I was at the time.

"It ain't The Dog," Jesse told me. "The Dog's a damn survivor."

You never knew where Brother Jesse got his stuff, and you never really knew if he was anybody's brother. The only time I asked, he said, "I come from a close-knit family such as your own," and that made no sense. My own father died when I was twelve, and my mother married again when I turned seventeen. She picked up and moved to Wisconsin.

No one even knew when, or how, Jesse got to Montana territory. We just looked up one day, and there he was, as natural as if he'd always been here, and maybe he always had.

His eighty acres began to fill up. Old printing presses stood gap-mouthed like spinsters holding conversation. A salvaged greenhouse served for storing dog food, engine parts, chromium hair dryers from 1930's

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beauty shops, dime-store pottery, blades for hay cutters, binder twine, an old gas-powered crosscut saw, seats from a school bus, and a bunch of other stuff not near as useful.

A couple of tabbies lived in that greenhouse, but the Big Cat stood outside. It was an old D6 bulldozer with a shovel, and Jesse stoked it up from time to time. Mostly it just sat there. In summers, it provided shade for Jesse's dogs: Potato was brown and fat and not too bright, while Chip was little and fuzzy. Sometimes they rode with Jesse, and sometimes stayed home. Me or Mike Tarbush fed them. When anything big happened, you could count on those two dogs to get underfoot. Except for me, they were the only ones who attended the funeral.

"If we gotta do it," Jesse said mournfully, "we gotta." He wound up the Cat, turned on the headlights, and headed for the grave site, which was an embankment overlooking Highway 2. Back in those days, Jesse's hair still shone black, and it was even blacker in the darkness. It dangled around a face that carried an Indian forehead and a Scotsman's nose. Denim stretched across most of the six feet of him, and he wasn't rangy; he was thin. He had feet to match his height, and his hands seemed bigger than his feet; but the man could skin a Cat.

I stood in moonlight and watched him work. A little puff of flame dwelt in the stack of the bulldozer. It flashed against the darkness of those distant mountains. It burbled hot in the cold spring moonlight. Jesse made rough cuts pretty quick, moved a lot of soil, then started getting delicate. He shaped and reshaped that grave. He carved a little from one side, backed the dozer, found his cut not satisfactory. He took a spoonful of earth to straighten things, then fussed with the grade leading into the grave. You could tell he wanted a slight elevation, so the Hudson's nose would be sniffing toward the road. Old Potato dog had a hound's ears, but not a hound's good sense. He started baying at the moon.

It came to me that I was scared. Then it came to me that I was scared most of the time anyway. I was nineteen, and folks talked about having a war across the sea. I didn't want to hear about it. On top of the war talk, women were driving me crazy: the ones who said "no" and the ones who said "yes." It got downright mystifying just trying to figure out which was worse. At nineteen, it's hard to know how to act. There were whole weeks when I could pass myself off as a hellion, then something would go sour. I'd get hit by a streak of conscience and start acting like a missionary.

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"Jed, " Jesse told me from the seat of the dozer, "go rig a tow on Miss Molly." In the headlights the grave now looked like a garage dug into the side of that little slope. Brother Jesse eased the Cat back in there to fuss with the grade. I stepped slow toward the Hudson, wiggled under, and fetched the towing cable around the frame. Potato howled. Chip danced like a fuzzy fury, and started chewing on my boot like he was trying to drag me from under the Hudson. I was on my back trying to kick Chip away and secure the cable. Then I like to died from fright.

Nothing else in the world sounds anywhere near like a Hudson starter. It's a combination of whine and clatter and growl. If I'd been dead a thousand years, you could stand me right up with a Hudson starter. There's threat in that sound. There's also the promise that things can get pretty rowdy, pretty quick.

The starter went off. The Hudson jiggled. In the one-half second it took to get from under that car, I thought of every bad thing I ever did in my life. I was headed for Hell, certain sure. By the time I was on my feet, there wasn't an ounce of blood showing anywhere on me. When the old folks say, "white as a sheet," they're talking about a guy under a Hudson.

Brother Jesse climbed from the Cat and gave me a couple of shakes.

"She ain't dead," I stuttered. "The engine turned over. Miss Molly's still thinking speedy." From Highway 2 came the wail of Mike Tarbush's '48 Roadmaster. Mike loved and cussed that car. It always flattened out at around eighty.

"There's still some sap left in the batt'ry," Jesse said about the Hudson. "You probably caused a short." He dropped the cable around the hitch on the dozer. "Steer her," he said.

The steering wheel still felt alive, despite what Jesse said. I crouched behind the wheel as the Hudson got dragged toward the grave. Its brakes locked twice, but the towing cable held. The locked brakes caused the car to sideslip. Each time, Jesse cussed. Cold spring moonlight made the shadowed grave look like a cave of darkness.

The Hudson bided its time. We got it lined up, then pushed it backward into the grave. The hunched front fenders spread beside the snarly grille. The front bumper was the only thing about that car that still showed clean and uncluttered. I could swear Miss Molly moved in the darkness of the grave, about to come charging onto Highway 2. Then she seemed to make some kind of decision, and sort of settled down. Jesse gave the eulogy.

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"This here car never did nothing bad," he said. "I must have seen a million crap-crates, but this car wasn't one of them. She had a second gear like Hydramatic, and you could wind to seventy before you dropped to third. There wasn't no top end to her — at least I never had the guts to find it. This here was a hundred-mile-an-hour car on a bad night, and God knows what on a good'n." From Highway 2, you could hear the purr of Matt Simons's '56 Dodge, five speeds, what with the overdrive, and Matt was scorching.

Potato howled long and mournful. Chip whined. Jesse scratched his head, trying to figure a way to end the eulogy. It came to him like a blessing. "I can't prove it," he said, "'cause no one could. But I expect this car has passed The Road Dog maybe a couple of hundred times." He made like he was going to cross himself, then remembered he was Methodist. "Rest in peace," he said, and he said it with eyes full of tears. "There ain't that many who can comprehend The Dog." He climbed back on the Cat and began to fill the grave.

Next day, Jesse mounded the grave with real care. He erected a marker, although the marker was more like a little signboard:

1947– 1961
Hudson coupe — "Molly"
220,023 miles on straight eight cylinder
Died of busted crankshaft
Beloved in the memory of
Jesse Still

Montana roads are long and lonesome, and Highway 2 is lonesomest. You pick it up over on the Idaho border where the land is mountains. Bear and cougar still live pretty good, and beaver still build dams. The highway runs beside some pretty lakes. Canada is no more than a jump away; it hangs at your left shoulder when you're headed east.

And can you roll those mountains? Yes, oh yes. It's two-lane all the way across, and twisty in the hills. From Libby, you ride down to Kalispell, then pop back north. The hills last till the Blackfoot reservation. It's rangeland into Cut Bank, then to Havre. That's just about the center of the state.

Just let the engine howl from town to town. The road goes through a dozen, then swings south. And there you are at Glasgow and the river. By

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Wolf Point, you're in cropland, and it's flat from there until Chicago.

I almost hate to tell about this road, because easterners may want to come and visit. Then they'll do something dumb at a blind entry. The state will erect more metal crosses. Enough folks die up here already. And it's sure no place for rice grinders, or tacky Swedish station wagons, or high-priced German crap-crates. This was always a V-8 road, and V-12 if you had 'em. In the old, old days there were even a few V-16s up here. The top end on those things came when friction stripped the tires from too much speed.

Speed or not, brakes sure sounded as cars passed Miss Molly's grave. Pickup trucks fishtailed as men snapped them to the shoulder. The men would sit in their trucks for a minute, scratching their heads like they couldn't believe what they'd just seen. Then they'd climb from the truck, walk back to the grave, and read the marker. About half of them would start holding their sides. One guy even rolled around on the ground, he was laughing so much.

"These old boys are laughing now," Brother Jesse told me, "but I predict a change in attitude. I reckon they'll come around before first snowfall."

With his car dead, Jesse had to find a set of wheels. He swapped an old hay rake and a gang of discs for a '49 Chevrolet.

"It wouldn't pull the doorknob off a cathouse," he told me. "It's just to get around in while I shop."

The whole deal was going to take some time. Knowing Jesse, I figured he'd go through half a dozen trades before finding something comfortable. And I was right.

He first showed up in an old Packard hearse that once belonged to a funeral home in Billings. He'd swapped the Chev for the hearse, plus a gilt-covered coffin so gaudy it wouldn't fit anybody but a radio preacher. He swapped the hearse to Sam Winder, who aimed to use it for hunting trips. Sam's dogs wouldn't go anywhere near the thing. Sam opened all the windows and the back door, then took the hearse up to speed trying to blow out all the ghosts. The dogs still wouldn't go near it. Sam said, "To hell with it," and pushed it into a ravine. Every rabbit and fox and varmint in that ravine came bailing out, and nobody has gone in there ever since.

Jesse traded the coffin to Old Man Jefferson, who parked the thing in his woodshed. Jefferson was supposed to be on his last legs, but figured he wasn't ever, never, going to die if his poor body knew it would be buried in

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that monstrosity. It worked for several years, too, until a bad winter came along, and he split it up for firewood. But we still remember him.

Jesse came out of those trades with a '47 Pontiac and a Model T. He sold the Model T to a collector, then traded the Pontiac and forty bales of hay for a '53 Studebaker. He swapped the Studebaker for a ratty pickup and all the equipment in a restaurant that went bust. He peddled the equipment to some other poor fellow who was hell-bent to go bust in the restaurant business. Then he traded the pickup for a motorcycle, plus a '51 Plymouth that would just about get out of its own way. By the time he peddled both of them, he had his pockets full of cash and was riding shanks' mare.

"Jed," he told me, "let's you and me go to the big city." He was pretty happy, but I remembered how scared I'd been at the funeral. I admit to being skittish.

From the center of north Montana, there weren't a championship lot of big cities. West was Seattle, which was sort of rainy and mythological. North was Winnipeg, a cow town. South was Salt Lake City. To the east. . . .

"The hell with it," Brother Jesse said. "We'll go to Minneapolis."

It was about a thousand miles. Maybe fifteen hours, what with the roads. You could sail Montana and North Dakota, but those Minnesota cops were humorless.

I was shoving a sweet old '53 Desoto. It had a good bit under the bonnet, but the suspension would make a grown man cry. It was a beautiful beast, though. Once you got up to speed, that front end would track like a cat. The upholstery was like brand-new. The radio worked. There wasn't a scratch or ding on it. I had myself a banker's car, and there I was, only nineteen.

"We may want to loiter," Jesse told me. "Plan on a couple of overnights."

I had a job, but told myself that I was due for a vacation, and so screw it. Brother Jesse put down food for the tabbies and whistled up the dogs. Potato hopped into the backseat in his large, dumb way. He looked expectant. Chip sort of hesitated. He made a couple of jumps straight up, then backed down and started barking. Jesse scooped him up and shoved him in with old Potato dog.

"The upholstery," I hollered. It was the first time I ever stood up to Jesse.

Jesse got an old piece of tarp to put under the dogs. "Pee, and you're a goner," he told Potato.

We drove steady through the early-summer morning. The Desoto hung

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in around eighty, which was no more than you'd want, considering the suspension. Rangeland gave way to cropland. The radio plugged away with western music, beef prices, and an occasional preacher saying, "Grace" and "Gimmie." Highway 2 rolled straight ahead, sometimes rising gradual, so that cars appeared like rapid running spooks out of the blind entries. There'd be a little flash of sunlight from a windshield. Then a car would appear over the rise, and usually it was wailing.

We came across a hell of a wreck just beyond Havre. A new Mercury station wagon rolled about fifteen times across the landscape. There were two nice-dressed people and two children. Not one of them ever stood a chance. They rattled like dice in a drum. I didn't want to see what I was looking at.

Bad wrecks always made me sick, but not sick to puking. That would not have been manly. I prayed for those people under my breath and got all shaky. We pulled into a crossroads bar for a sandwich and a beer. The dogs hopped out. Plenty of hubcaps were nailed on the wall of the bar. We took a couple of them down and filled them with water from an outside tap. The dogs drank and peed.

"I've attended a couple myself," Brother Jesse said about the wreck. "Drove a Terraplane off a bridge back in '53. Damn near drownded." Jesse wasn't about to admit to feeling bad. He just turned thoughtful.

"This here is a big territory," he said to no one in particular. "But you can get across her if you hustle. I reckon that Merc was loaded wrong, or blew a tire." Beyond the windows of the bar, eight metal crosses lined the highway. Somebody had tied red plastic roses on one of them. Another one had plastic violets and forget-me-nots.

We lingered a little. Jesse talked to the guy at the bar, and I ran a rack at the pool table. Then Jesse bought a six-pack while I headed for the can. Since it was still early in the day, the can was clean; all the last night's pee and spit mopped from the floor. Somebody had just painted the walls. There wasn't a thing written on them, except that Road Dog had signed in.

Road Dog
How are things in Glocca Mora?

His script was spidery and perfect, like an artist who drew a signature. I touched the paint, and it was still tacky. We had missed The Dog by only a few minutes.

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ROAD DOG was like Jesse in a way. Nobody could say exactly when he first showed up, but one day he was there. We started seeing the name "Road Dog" written in what Matt Simons called "a fine Spencerian hand." There was always a message attached, and Matt called them "cryptic." The signature and messages flashed from the walls of cans in bars, truck stops, and roadside cafés through four states.

We didn't know Road Dog's route at first. Most guys were tied to work or home or laziness. In a year or two, though, Road Dog's trail got mapped. His fine hand showed up all along Highway 2, trailed east into North Dakota, dropped south through South Dakota, then ran back west across Wyoming. He popped north through Missoula and climbed the state until he connected with Highway 2 again. Road Dog, whoever he was, ran a constant square of road that covered roughly two thousand miles.

Sam Winder claimed Road Dog was a Communist who taught social studies at U. of Montana. "Because," Sam claimed, "that kind of writing comes from Europe. That writing ain't U.S.A."

Mike Tarbush figured Road Dog was a retired cartoonist from a newspaper. He figured nobody could spot The Dog, because The Dog slipped past us in a Nash, or some other old-granny car.

Brother Jesse suggested that Road Dog was a truck driver, or maybe a gypsy, but sounded like he knew better.

Matt Simons supposed Road Dog was a traveling salesman with a flair for advertising. Matt based his notion on one of the cryptic messages:

Road Dog
Ringling Bros. Barnum and Toothpaste

I didn't figure anything. Road Dog stood in my imagination as the heart and soul of Highway 2. When night was deep and engines blazed, I could hang over the wheel and run down that tunnel of two-lane into the night.

The nighttime road is different than any other thing. Ghosts rise around the metal crosses, and ghosts hitchhike along the wide berm. All the mysteries of the world seem normal after dark. If imagination shows dead thumbs aching for a ride, those dead folk only prove the hot and spermy goodness of life. I'd overtake some taillights, grab the other lane, and blow doors off some partygoer who tried to stay out of the ditches. A man can

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sing and cuss and pray. The miles fill with dreams of power, and women, and happy, happy times.

Road Dog seemed part of that romance. He was the very soul of mystery, a guy who looked at the dark heart of the road and still flew free enough to make jokes and write that fine hand.

In daytime, it was different, though. When I saw Road Dog signed in on the wall of that can, it just seemed like a real bad sign.

The guy who owned the bar had seen no one. He claimed he'd been in the back room putting bottles in his cold case. The Dog had come and gone like a spirit.

Jesse and I stood in the parking lot outside the bar. Sunlight laid earthy and hot across the new crops. A little puff of dust rose from a side road. It advanced real slow, so you could tell it was a farm tractor. All around us, meadowlarks and tanagers were whooping it up.

"We'll likely pass him," Jesse said, "if we crowd a little." Jesse pretended he didn't care, but anyone would. We loaded the dogs, and even hung the hubcaps back up where we got them, because it was what a gentleman would do. The Desoto acted as eager as any Desoto could. We pushed the top end, which was eighty-nine, and maybe ninety-two downhill. At that speed, brakes don't give you much, so you'd better trust your steering and your tires.

If we passed The Dog, we didn't know it. He might have parked in one of the towns, and of course we dropped a lot of revs passing through towns, that being neighborly. What with a little loafing, some pee stops, and general fooling around, we did not hit Minneapolis until a little after midnight. When we checked into a motel on the strip, Potato was sleepy and grumpy. Chip looked relieved.

"Don't fall in love with that bed," Jesse told me. "Some damn salesman is out there waitin' to do us in. It pays to start early."

Car shopping with Jesse turned out as fascinating as anybody could expect. At 7:00 A.M., we cruised the lots. Cars stood in silent rows like advertising men lined up for group pictures. It being Minneapolis, we saw a lot of high-priced iron. Cadillacs and Packards and Lincolns sat beside Buick convertibles, hemi Chryslers, and Corvettes ("Nice c'hars," Jesse said about the Corvettes, "but no room to 'em. You couldn't carry more than one sack of feed."). Hudsons and Studebakers hunched along the back

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rows. On one lot was something called "Classic Lane." A Model A stood beside a '37 International pickup. An L29 Cord sat like a tombstone, which it was, because it had no engine. But, glory be, beside the Cord nestled a '39 LaSalle coupe just sparkling with threat. That LaSalle might have snookered Jesse, except something highly talented sat buried deep in the lot.

It was the last of the fast and elegant Lincolns, a '54 coupe as snarly as any man could want. The '53 model had taken the Mexican Road Race. The '54 was a refinement. After that the marque went downhill. It started building cars for businessmen and rich grannies.

Jesse walked round and round the Lincoln, which looked like it was used to being cherished. Matchless and scratchless. It was a little less than fire engine red, with a white roof and a grille that could shrug off a cow. That Linc was a solid set of fixings. Jesse got soft lights in his eyes. This was no Miss Molly, but this was Miss somebody. There were a lot of crap-crates running out there, but this Linc wasn't one of them.

"You prob'ly can't even get parts for the damn thing." Jesse murmured, and you could tell he was already scrapping with a salesman. He turned his back on the Lincoln. "We'll catch a bite to eat," he said. "This may take a couple days."

I felt sort of bubbly. "The Dog ain't gonna like this," I told Jesse.

"The Dog is gonna love it," he said. "Me and The Dog *knows* that road."

By the time the car lots opened at 9:00 A.M., Jesse had a trader's light in his eyes. About all that needs saying is that never before, or since, did I ever see a used-car salesman cry.

The poor fellow never had a chance. He stood in his car lot most of the day while me and Jesse went through every car lot on the strip. We waved to him from a sweet little '57 Cad, and we cruised past real smooth in a mama-san '56 Imperial. We kicked tires on anything sturdy while he was watching, and we never even got to his lot until fifteen minutes before closing. Jesse and I climbed from my Desoto. Potato and Chip tailed after us.

"I always know when I get to Minneapolis," Jesse said to me, but loud enough the salesman could just about hear. "My woman wants to lay a farmer, and my dogs start pukin'." When we got within easy hearing range, Jesse's voice got humble. "I expect this fella can help a cowboy in a fix."

I followed, experiencing considerable admiration. In two sentences,

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Jesse had his man confused.

Potato was dumb enough that he trotted right up to the Lincoln. Chip sat and panted, pretending indifference. Then he ambled over to a ragged-out Pontiac and peed on the tire. "I must be missing something," Jesse said to the salesman, "because that dog has himself a dandy nose." He looked at the Pontiac. "This thing got an engine?"

We all conversed for the best part of an hour. Jesse refused to even look at the Lincoln. He sounded real serious about the LaSalle, to the point of running it around a couple of blocks. It was a darling. It had ceramic covered manifolds to protect against heat and rust. It packed a long-stroke V-8 with enough torque to bite rubber in second gear. My Desoto was a pretty thing, but until that LaSalle, I never realized that my car was a total pussycat. When we left the lot, the salesman looked sad. He was late for supper.

"Stay with what you've got," Jesse told me as he climbed in my Desoto. "The clock has run out on that LaSalle. Let a collector have it. I hate it when something good dies for lack of parts."

I wondered if he was thinking of Miss Molly.

"Because," Jesse said, and kicked the tire on a silly little Volkswagen, "the great, good cars are dying. I blame it on the Germans."

Next day, we bought the Lincoln and made the salesman feel like one proud pup. He figured he foisted something off on Jesse that Jesse didn't want. He was so stuck on himself that he forgot that he had asked a thousand dollars, and come away with $550. He even forgot that his eyes were swollen, and that maybe he crapped his pants.

We went for a test drive, but only after Jesse and I crawled around under the Linc. A little body lead lumped in the left rear fender, but the front end stood sound. Nobody had pumped any sawdust into the differential. We found no water in the oil, or oil in the water. The salesman stood around, admiring his shoeshine. He was one of those easterners who can't help talking down to people, especially when he's trying to be nice. I swear he wore a white tie with little red ducks on it. That Minnesota sunlight made his red hair blond, and his face pop with freckles.

Jesse drove real quiet until he found an interesting stretch of road. The salesman sat beside him. Me and Potato and Chip hunkered in the backseat. Chip looked sort of nauseated, but Potato was pretty happy.

"I'm afraid," Jesse said regretful, "that this thing is gonna turn out to be

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a howler. A fella gets a few years on him, and he don't want a screamy car." Brother Jesse couldn't have been much more than thirty, but he tugged on his nose and ears like he was ancient. "I sure hope," he said real mournful, "that nobody stuck a boot in any of these here tires." Then he poured on some coal.

There was a most satisfying screech. That Linc took out like a roadrunner in heat. The salesman's head snapped backward, and his shoulders dug into the seat. Potato gave a happy, happy woof and stuck his nose out the open window. I felt like yelling, "Hosanna," but knew enough to keep my big mouth shut. The Linc shrugged off a couple of cars that were conservatively motoring. It wheeled past a hay truck as the tires started humming. The salesman's freckles began to stand up like warts while the airstream howled. Old Potato kept his nose sticking through the open window, and the wind kept drying it. Potato was so damn dumb he tried to lick it wet while his nose stayed in the airstream. His tongue blew sideways.

"It ain't nothing but speed," Jesse complained. "Look at this here steering." He joggled the wheel considerable, which at ninety got even more considerable. The salesman's tie blew straight backward. The little red ducks matched his freckles. "Jee-sus-Chee-sus," he said. "Eight hundred, and slow down." He braced himself against the dash.

When it hit the century mark, the Linc developed a little float in the front end. I expect all of us were thinking about the tires.

You could tell Jesse was jubilant. The Linc still had some pedal left.

"I'm gettin' old," Jesse hollered above the wind. "This ain't no car for an old man."

"Seven hundred," the salesman said. "And Mother of God, slow it down."

"Five-fifty," Jesse told him, and dug the pedal down one more notch.

"You got it," the salesman hollered. His face twisted up real teary. Then Potato got all grateful and started licking the guy on the back of the neck.

So Jesse cut the speed and bought the Linc. He did it diplomatic, pretending he was sorry he'd made the offer. That was kind of him. After all, the guy was nothing but a used-car salesman.

WE DID a second night in that motel. The Linc and Desoto sat in an all-night filling station. Lube, oil change, and wash, because we were riding high. Jesse had a heap of money left over. In the morning, we got new jeans and shirts, so as to ride

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along like gentlemen.

"We'll go back through South Dakota," Jesse told me. "There's a place I've heard about."

"What are we looking for?"

"We're checking on The Dog," Jesse told me, and would say no more.

We eased west to Bowman, just under the North Dakota line. Jesse sort of leaned into it, just taking joy from the whole occasion. I flowed along as best the Desoto could. Potato rode with Jesse, and Chip sat on the front seat beside me. Chip seemed rather easier in his mind.

A roadside café hunkered among tall trees. It didn't even have a neon sign. Real old-fashioned.

"I heard of this place all my life," Jesse said as he climbed from the Linc. "This here is the only outhouse in the world with a guest registry." He headed toward the rear of the café.

I tailed along, and Jesse, he was right. It was a palatial privy built like a little cottage. The men's side was a three-holer. There was enough room for a stand-up desk. On the desk was one of those old-fashioned business ledgers like you used to see in banks.

"They're supposed to have a slew of these inside," Jesse said about the register as he flipped pages. "All the way back to the early days."

Some spirit of politeness seemed to take over when you picked up that register. There was hardly any bad talk. I read a few entries:

On this site, May 16th, 1971, James John Johnson (John-John) cussed hell out of his truck.

I came, I saw, I kinda liked it. — Bill Samuels, Tulsa

This place does *know squat. — Pauley Smith, Ogden*

This South Dakota ain't so bad,
but I sure got the blues,
I'm working in Tacoma,
'cause my kids all need new shoes. — Sad George

Brother Jesse flipped through the pages. "I'm even told," he said, "that Teddy Roosevelt crapped here. This is a fine old place." He sort of hummed

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as he flipped. "Uh, huh," he said, "The Dog done made his pee spot." He pointed to a page:

Road Dog
Run and run as fast as you can
you can't catch me — I'm the Gingerbread Man.

Jesse just grinned. "He's sorta upping the ante, ain't he? You reckon this is getting serious?" Jesse acted like he knew what he was talking about, but I sure didn't.

II

WE DIDN'T know, as we headed home, that Jesse's graveyard business was about to take off. That wouldn't change him, though. He'd almost always had a hundred dollars in his jeans anyway, and was usually a happy man. What changed him was Road Dog and Miss Molly.

The trouble started awhile after we crossed the Montana line. Jesse ran ahead in the Lincoln, and I tagged behind in my Desoto. We drove Highway 2 into a western sunset. It was one of those magic summers where rain sweeps in from British Columbia just regular enough to keep things growing. Rabbits get fat and foolish, and foxes put on weight. Rattlesnakes come out of ditches to cross the sun-hot road. It's not sporting to run over their middles. You have to take them in the head. Redwings perch on fence posts, and magpies flash black and white from the berm, where they scavenge road kills.

We saw a hell of a wreck just after Wolf Point. A guy in an old Kaiser came over the back of a rise and ran under a tanker truck that burned. Smoke rose black as a plume of crows, and we saw it five miles away. By the time we got there, the truck driver stood in the middle of the road, all white and shaking. The guy in the Kaiser sat behind the wheel. It was fearful to see how fast fire can work, and just terrifying to see bones hanging over a steering wheel. I remember thinking the guy no doubt died before any fire started, and we were feeling more than he was.

That didn't help. I said a prayer under my breath. The truck driver wasn't to blame, but he took it hard as a Presbyterian. Jesse tried to comfort him,

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without much luck. The road melted and stank and began to burn. Nobody was drinking, but it was certain-sure we were all more sober than we'd ever been in our lives. Two deputies showed up. Cars drifted in easy, because of the smoke. In a couple of hours, there were probably twenty cars lined up on either side of the wreck.

"He must of been asleep or drunk," Jesse said about the driver of the Kaiser. "How in hell can a man run under a tanker truck?"

When the cops reopened the road, night hovered over the plains. Nobody cared to run much over sixty, even beneath a bright moon. It seemed like a night to be superstitious, a night when there was a deer or pronghorn out there just ready to jump into your headlights. It wasn't a good night to drink, or shoot pool, or mess around in strange bars. It was a time for being home with your woman, if you had one.

On most nights, ghosts do not show up beside the metal crosses, and they sure don't show up in owl light. Ghosts stand out on the darkest, moonless nights, and only then when bars are closed and the only thing open is the road.

I never gave it a thought. I chased Jesse's taillights, which on that Lincoln were broad, up-and-down slashes in the dark. Chip sat beside me, sad and solemn. I rubbed his ears to perk him, but he just laid down and snuffled. Chip was sensitive. He knew I felt bad over that wreck.

The first ghost showed up on the left berm and fizzled before the headlights. It was a lady ghost, and a pretty old one, judging from her long white hair and long white dress. She flicked on and off in just a flash, so maybe it was a road dream. Chip was so depressed he didn't even notice, and Jesse didn't, either. His steering and his brakes didn't wave to me.

Everything stayed straight for another ten miles, then a whole peck of ghosts stood on the right berm. A bundle of crosses shone all silvery white in the headlights. The ghosts melted into each other. You couldn't tell how many, but you could tell they were expectant. They looked like people lined up for a picture show. Jesse never gave a sign he saw them. I told myself to get straight. We hadn't had much sleep in the past two nights, and did some drinking the night before. We'd rolled near two thousand miles.

Admonishing seemed to work. Another twenty minutes passed, maybe thirty, and nothing happened. Wind chased through the open windows of the Desoto, and the radio gave mostly static. I kicked off my boots because that helps you stay awake, the bottoms of the feet being sensitive. Then a

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single ghost showed up on the right-hand berm, and boy-howdy.

Why anybody would laugh while being dead has got to be a puzzle. This ghost was tall, with Indian hair like Jesse's, and I could swear he looked like Jesse, the spitting image. This ghost was jolly. He clapped his hands and danced. Then he gave me the old road sign for "roll 'em," his hand circling in the air as he danced.. The headlights penetrated him, showed tall grass solid at the roadside, and instead of legs, he stood on a column of mist. Still, he was dancing.

It wasn't road dreams. It was hallucination. The nighttime road just fills with things seen or partly seen. When too much scary stuff happens, it's time to pull her over.

I couldn't do it, though. Suppose I pulled over, and suppose it wasn't hallucination? I recall thinking that a man don't ordinarily care for preachers until he needs one. It seemed like me and Jesse were riding through the Book of Revelations. I dropped my speed, then flicked my lights a couple times. Jesse paid it no attention, and then Chip got peculiar.

He didn't bark; he chirped. He stood up on the front seat, looking out the back window, and his paws trembled. He shivered, chirped, shivered, and went chirp, chirp, chirp. Headlights in back of us were closing fast.

I've been closed on plenty of times by guys looking for a ditch. Headlights have jumped out of night and fog and mist when nobody should be pushing forty. I've been overtaken by drunks and suiciders. No set of headlights ever came as fast as the ones that began to wink in the mirrors. This Highway 2 is a quick, quick road, but it's not the salt flats of Utah. The crazy man behind me was trying to set a new land speed record.

Never confuse an idiot. I stayed off the brakes and coasted, taking off speed and signaling my way onto the berm. The racer could have my share of the road. I didn't want any part of that boy's troubles. Jesse kept pulling away as I slowed. It seemed like he didn't even see the lights. Chip chirped, then sort of rolled down on the floorboards and cried.

For ninety seconds, I feared being dead. For one second, I figured it already happened. Wind banged the Desoto sideways. Wind whooped, the way it does in winter. The headlights blew past. What showed was the curve of a Hudson fender — the kind of curve you'd recognize if you'd been dead a million years — and what showed was the little, squinchy shapes of a Hudson's taillights; and what showed was the slanty doorpost like a nail running kitty-corner; and what showed was slivers of reflection from

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cracked glass on the rider's side; and what sounded was the drumbeat of a straight-eight engine whanging like a locomotive gone wild; the thrump, bumpa, thrum of a crankshaft whipping in its bed. The slaunch-forward form of Miss Molly wailed, and showers of sparks blew from the tailpipe as Miss Molly rocketed.

Chip was not the only one howling. My voice rose high as the howl of Miss Molly. We all sang it out together, while Jesse cruised three, maybe four miles ahead. It wasn't two minutes before Miss Molly swept past that Linc like it was foundationed in cement. Sparks showered like the 4th of July, and Jesse's brake lights looked pale beside the fireworks. The Linc staggered against wind as Jesse headed for the berm. Wind smashed against my Desoto.

Miss Molly's taillights danced as she did a jig up the road, and then they winked into darkness as Miss Molly topped a rise, or disappeared. The night went darker than dark. A cloud scudded out of nowhere and blocked the moon.

Alongside the road the dancing ghost showed up in my headlights, and I could swear it was Jesse. He laughed like at a good joke, but he gave the old road sign for "slow it down," his hand palm-down like he was patting an invisible pup. It seemed sound advice, and I blamed near liked him. After Miss Molly, a happy ghost seemed downright companionable.

"Shitfire," said Jesse, and that's all he said for the first five minutes after I pulled in behind him. I climbed from the Desoto and walked to the Linc. Old Potato dog sprawled on the seat in a dead faint, and Jesse rubbed his ears trying to warm him back to consciousness. Jesse sat over the wheel like a man who had just met Jesus. His hand touched gentle on Potato's ears, and his voice sounded reverent. Brother Jesse's conversion wasn't going to last, but at the time, it was just beautiful. He had the lights of salvation in his eyes, and his skinny shoulders weren't shaking too much. "I miss my c'har," he muttered finally, and blinked. He wasn't going to cry if he could help. "She's trying to tell me something," he whispered. "Let's find a bar. Miss Molly's in car heaven, certain-sure."

We pulled away, found a bar, and parked. We drank some beer and slept across the car seats. Nobody wanted to go back on that road.

When we woke to a morning hot and clear, Potato's fur had turned white. It didn't seem to bother him much, but, for the rest of his life, he was a lot

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more thoughtful.

"Looks like mashed Potato," Jesse said, but he wasn't talking a whole lot. We drove home like a couple of old ladies. Guys came scorching past, cussing at our granny speed. We figured they could get mad and stay mad, or get mad and get over it. We made it back to Jesse's place about two in the afternoon.

A couple of things happened quick. Jesse parked beside his house trailer, and the front end fell out of the Lincoln. The right side went down, thump, and the right front tire sagged. Jesse turned even whiter than me, and I was bloodless. We had posted over a hundred miles an hour in that thing. Somehow, when we crawled around underneath inspecting it, we missed something. My shoulders and legs shook so hard I could barely get out of the Desoto. Chip was polite. He just yelped with happiness about being home, but he didn't trot across my lap as we climbed from the car.

Nobody could trust their legs. Jesse climbed out of the Linc and leaned against it. You could see him chewing over all the possibilities, then arriving at the only one that made sense. Some hammer mechanic bolted that front end together with no locknut, no cotter pin, no lock washer, no lock-nothin'. He just wrenched down a plain old nut, and the nut worked loose.

"Miss Molly knew," Jesse whispered. "That's what she was trying to tell." He felt a lot better the minute he said it. Color came back to his face. He peered around the corner of the house trailer, looking toward Miss Molly's grave.

Mike Tarbush was over there with his '48 Roadmaster. Matt Simons stood beside him, and Matt's '56 Dodge sat beside the Roadmaster, looking smug; which that model Dodge always did.

"I figger," Brother Jesse whispered, "that we should keep shut about last night. Word would just get around that we were alkies." He pulled himself together, arranged his face like a horse trying to grin, and walked toward the Roadmaster.

Mike Tarbush was a man in mourning. He sat on the fat trunk of that Buick and gazed off toward the mountains. Mike wore extra-large of everything, and still looked stout. He sported a thick red mustache to make up for his bald head. From time to time, he bragged about his criminal record, which amounted to three days in jail for assaulting a pool table. He threw it through a bar window.

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Now his mustache drooped, and Mike seemed small inside his clothes. The hood of the Roadmaster gaped open. Under that hood, things couldn't be worse. The poor thing had thrown a rod into the next county.

Jesse looked under the hood and tsked. "I know what you're going through," he said to Mike. He kind of petted the Roadmaster. "I always figured Betty Lou would last a century. What happened?"

There's no call to tell about a grown man blubbering, and especially not one who can heave pool tables. Mike finally got straight enough to tell the story.

"We was chasing the Dog," he said. "At least I think so. Three nights ago over to Kalispell. This Golden Hawk blew past me sittin'." Mike watched the distant mountains like he'd seen a miracle, or else like he was expecting one to happen. "That sonovabitch shore can drive," he whispered in disbelief. "Blown out by a damn Studebaker."

"But a very swift Studebaker," Matt Simons said. Matt is as small as Mike is large, and Matt is educated. Even so, he's set his share of fence posts. He looks like an algebra teacher, but not as delicate.

"Betty Lou went on up past her flat spot," Mike whispered. "She was tryin'. We had ninety on the clock, and The Dog left us sitting." He patted the Roadmaster. "I reckon she died of a broken heart."

"We got three kinds of funerals," Jesse said, and he was sympathetic. "We got the no-frills type, the regular type, and the extra-special. The extra-special comes with flowers." He said it with a straight face, and Mike took it that way. He bought the extra-special, and that was sixty-five dollars.

Mike put up a nice marker:

1948–1961
Roadmaster two-door — Betty Lou
Gone to Glory while chasing The Dog
She was the best friend of Mike Tarbush

BROTHER JESSE worked on the Lincoln until the front end tracked rock solid. He named it Sue Ellen, but not *Miss* Sue Ellen, there being no way to know if Miss Molly was jealous. When we examined Miss Molly's grave, the soil seemed rumpled. Wildflowers, which Jesse sowed on the grave, bloomed in midsummer. I couldn't get it out of my head that Miss Molly was still alive, and maybe

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Jesse couldn't, either.

Jesse explained about the Lincoln's name. "Sue Ellen is a lady I knew in Pocatello. I expect she misses me." He said it hopeful, like he didn't really believe it.

It looked to me like Jesse was brooding. Night usually found him in town, but sometimes he disappeared. When he was around, he drove real calm and always got home before midnight. The wildness hadn't come out of Jesse, but he had it on a tight rein. He claimed he dreamed of Miss Molly. Jesse was working something out.

And so was I, awake or dreaming. Thoughts of the Road Dog filled my nights, and so did thoughts of the dancing ghost. As summer deepened, restlessness took me wailing under moonlight. The road unreeled before my headlights like a magic line that pointed to places under a warm sun where ladies laughed and fell in love. Something went wrong, though. During that summer the ladies stopped being dreams and became only imagination. When I told Jesse, he claimed I was just growing up. I wished for once Jesse was wrong. I wished for a lot of things, and one of the wishes came true. It was Mike Tarbush, not me, who got in the next tangle with Miss Molly.

Mike rode in from Billings, where he'd been car shopping. He showed up at Jesse's place on Sunday afternoon. Montana lay restful. Birds hunkered on wires, or called from high grass. Highway 2 ran watery with sunlight, deserted as a road ever could be. When Mike rolled a '56 Merc up beside the Linc, it looked like Old Home Week at a Ford dealership.

"I got to look at something," Mike said when he climbed from the Mercury. He sort of plodded over to Miss Molly's grave and hovered. Light breezes blew the wildflowers sideways. Mike looked like a bear trying to shake confusion from its head. He walked to the Roadmaster's grave. New grass sprouted reddish green. "I was sober," Mike said. "Most Saturday nights, maybe I ain't, but I was sober as a deputy."

For a while, nobody said anything. Potato sat glowing and white and thoughtful. Chip slept in the sun beside one of the tabbies. Then Chip woke up. He turned around three times and dashed to hide under the bulldozer.

"Now, tell me I ain't crazy," Mike said. He perched on the front fender of the Merc, which was blue and white and adventuresome. "Name of Judith," he said about the Merc. "A real lady." He swabbed sweat from his bald head. "I got blown out by Betty Lou and Miss Molly. That sound

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reasonable?" He swabbed some more sweat and looked at the graves, which looked like little speed bumps on the prairie. "Nope," he answered himself, "that don't sound reasonable a-tall."

"Something's wrong with your Mercury," Jesse said, real quiet. "You got a bad tire, or a hydraulic line about to blow, or something screwy in the steering."

He made Mike swear not to breathe a word. Then he told about Miss Molly and about the front end of the Lincoln. When the story got over, Mike looked like a halfback hit by a twelve-man line.

"Don't drive another inch," Jesse said. "Not until we find what's wrong."

"That car already cracked a hundred," Mike whispered. "I bought it special to chase one sumbitch in a Studebaker." He looked toward Betty Lou's grave. "The Dog did that."

The three of us went through that Merc like men panning gold. The trouble was so obvious we missed it for two hours while the engine cooled. Then Jesse caught it. The fuel filter rubbed its underside against the valve cover. When Jesse touched it, the filter collapsed. Gasoline spilled on the engine and the spark plugs. That Merc was getting set to catch on fire.

"I got to wonder if The Dog did it," Jesse said about Betty Lou after Mike drove away. "I wonder if the Road Dog is the Studebaker type."

Nights started to get serious, but any lonesomeness on that road was only in a man's head. As summer stretched past its longest days, and sunsets started earlier, ghosts rose beside crosses before daylight hardly left the land. We drove to work and back, drove to town and back. My job was steady at a filling station, but it asked day after day of the same old thing. We never did any serious wrenching; no engine rebuilds or transmissions, just tuneups and flat tires. I dearly wanted to meet a nice lady, but no woman in her right mind would mess with a pump jockey.

Nights were different, though. I figured I was going crazy, and Jesse and Mike were worse. Jesse finally got his situation worked out. He claimed Miss Molly was protecting him. Jesse and Mike took the Linc and the Merc on long runs, just wringing the howl out of those cars. Some nights, they'd flash past me at speed no sane man would try in darkness. Jesse was never a real big drinker, and Mike stopped altogether. They were too busy playing road games. It got so the state cop never tried to chase them. He just dropped past Jesse's place next day and passed out tickets.

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The dancing ghost danced in my dreams, both asleep and driving. When daylight left the land, I passed metal crosses and remembered some of the wrecks.

Three crosses stood on one side of the railroad track, and four crosses on the other side. The three happened when some Canadian cowboys lost a race with a train. It was too awful to remember, but on most nights, those guys stood looking down the tracks with startled eyes.

The four crosses happened when one-third of the senior class of '59 hit that grade too fast on prom night. They rolled a damned old Chevrolet. More bodies by Fisher. Now the two girls stood in their long dresses, looking wistful. The two boys pretended that none of it meant nothin'.

Farther out the road, things had happened before my time. An Indian ghost most often stood beside the ghost of a deer. In another place a chubby old rancher looked real picky and angry.

The dancing ghost continued unpredictable. All the other ghosts stood beside their crosses, but the dancing ghost showed up anywhere he wanted, anytime he wanted. I'd slow the Desoto as he came into my lights, and he was the spitting image of Jesse.

"I don't want to hear about it." Jesse said when I tried to tell him. "I'm on a roll. I'm even gettin' famous."

He was right about that. People up and down the line joked about Jesse and his graveyard business.

"It's the very best kind of advertising," he told me. "We'll see more action before snow flies."

"You won't see snow fly," I told him, standing up to him a second time. "Unless you slow down and pay attention."

"I've looked at heaps more road than you," he told me, "and seeing things is just part of the night. That nighttime road is different."

"This is starting to happen at last light."

"I don't see no ghosts," he told me, and he was lying. "Except Miss Molly once or twice." He wouldn't say anything more.

And Jesse was right. As summer ran on, more graves showed up near Miss Molly. A man named Mcguire turned up with a '41 Cad.

1941–1961
Fleetwood Coupe — Annie
304,018 miles on flathead V-8

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She was the luck of the Irishman
Pat Mcguire

And Sam Winder buried his '47 Packard.

1947–1961
Packard 2-door — Lois Lane
Super Buddy of Sam Winder
Up Up and Away

And Pete Johansen buried his pickup.

1946–1961
Ford pickup — Gertrude
211,000 miles give or take
Never a screamer
but a good pulling truck.
Pete Johansen put up many a day's work with her.

Montana roads are long and lonesome, and along the highline is lonesomest of all. From Saskatchewan to Texas, nothing stands tall enough to break the wind that begins to blow cold and clear toward late October. Rains sob away toward the Middle West, and grass turns goldish amber. Rattlesnakes move to high ground, where they will winter. Every creature on God's plains begins to fat-up against the winter. Soon it's going to be thirty below and the wind blowing.

Four-wheel-drive weather. Internationals and Fords, with Dodge crummy-wagons in the hills; cars and trucks will line up beside houses, garages, sheds, with electric wires leading from plugs to radiators and blocks. They look like packs of nursing pups. Work will slow, then stop. New work turns to accounting for the weather. Fuel, emergency generators, hay-bale insulation. Horses and cattle and deer look fuzzy beneath thick coats. Check your battery. If your rig won't start, and you're two miles from home, she won't die — but you might.

School buses creep from stop to stop, and bundled kids look like colorful little bears trotting through late-afternoon light. Snowy owls come floating in from northward, while folks go to church on Sunday against the time

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when there's some better amusement. Men hang around town, because home is either empty or crowded, depending on if you're married. Folks sit before television, watching the funny, goofy, unreal world where everybody plays at being sexy and naked, even when they're not.

And nineteen years old is lonesome, too. And work is lonesome when nobody much cares for you.

Before winter set in, I got it in my head to run the Road Dog's route. It was September. Winter would close us down pretty quick. The trip would be a luxury. What with room rent, and gas, and eating out, it was payday to payday with me. Still, one payday would account for gas and sandwiches. I could sleep across the seat. I hocked a Marlin .30-30 to Jesse for twenty bucks. He seemed happy with my notion. He even went into the greenhouse and came out with an arctic sleeping bag.

"In case things get vigorous," he said, and grinned. "Now get on out there and bite The Dog."

It was a happy time. Dreams of ladies sort of set themselves to one side as I cruised across the eternal land. I came to love the land that autumn, in a way that maybe ranchers do. The land stopped being something that a road ran across. Canadian honkers came winging in vees from the north. The great Montana sky stood easy as eagles. When I'd pull over and cut the engine, sounds of grasshoppers mixed with birdcalls. Once, a wild turkey, as smart as any domestic turkey is dumb, talked to himself and paid me not the least mind.

The Dog showed up right away. In a café in Malta:

Road Dog
"It was all a hideous mistake."
Christopher Columbus

In a bar in Tampico:

Road Dog
Who's afraid of the big bad Woof?

In another bar in Culbertson:

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Road Dog
Go East, young man, go East

I rolled Williston and dropped south through North Dakota. The Dog's trail disappeared until Watford City, where it showed up in the can of a filling station:

Road Dog
Atlantis and Sargasso
Full fathom five thy brother lies

And in a joint in Grassy Butte:

Road Dog
Ain't Misbehavin'

That morning in Grassy Butte, I woke to a sunrise where the land lay bathed in rose and blue. Silhouettes of grazing deer mixed with silhouettes of cattle. They herded together peaceful as a dream of having your own place, your own woman, and you working hard; and her glad to see you coming home.

In Bowman, The Dog showed up in a nice restaurant:

Road Dog
The Katzenjammer Kids minus one

Ghosts did not show up along the road, but the road stayed the same. I tangled with a bathtub Hudson, a '53, outside of Spearfish in South Dakota. I chased him into Wyoming like being dragged on a string. The guy played with me for twenty miles, then got bored. He shoved more coal in the stoker and purely flew out of sight.

Sheridan was a nice town back in those days, just nice and friendly; plus, I started to get sick of the way I smelled. In early afternoon, I found a five-dollar motel with a shower. That gave me the afternoon, the evening, and next morning if it seemed right. I spiffed up, put on a good shirt, slicked down my hair, and felt just fine.

The streets lay dusty and lazy. Ranchers' pickups stood all dented and

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work-worn before bars, and an old Indian sat on hay bales in the back of one of them. He wore a flop hat, and he seemed like the eyes and heart of the prairie. He looked at me like I was a splendid puppy that might someday amount to something. It seemed O.K. when he did it.

I hung around a soda fountain at the five-and-dime because a girl smiled. She was just beautiful. A little horsey-faced, but with sun-blonde hair, and with hands long-fingered and gentle. There wasn't a chance of talking, because she stood behind the counter for ladies' underwear. I pretended to myself that she looked sad when I left.

It got on to late afternoon. Sunlight drifted in between buildings, and shadows overreached the streets. Everything was normal, and then everything got scary.

I was just poking along, looking in store windows, checking the show at the movie house, when, ahead of me, Jesse walked toward a Golden Hawk. He was maybe a block and a half away, but it was Jesse, sure as God made sunshine. It was a Golden Hawk. There was no way of mistaking that car. Hawks were high-priced sets of wheels, and Studebaker never sold that many.

I yelled and ran. Jesse waited beside the car, looking sort of puzzled. When I pulled up beside him, he grinned.

"It's happening again," he said, and his voice sounded amused, but not mean. Sunlight made his face reddish, but shadow put his legs and feet in darkness. "You believe me to be a gentleman named Jesse Still." Behind him, shadows of buildings told that night was on its way. Sunset happens quick on the praries.

And I said, "Jesse, what in the hell are you doing in Sheridan?"

And he said, "Young man, you are not looking at Jesse Still." He said it quiet and polite, and he thought he had a point. His voice was smooth and cultured, so he sure didn't sound like Jesse. His hair hung combed-out, and he wore clothes that never came from a dry-goods. His jeans were soft-looking and expensive. His boots were tooled. They kind of glowed in the dusk. The Golden Hawk didn't have a dust speck on it, and the interior had never carried a tool, or a car part, or a sack of feed. It just sparkled. I almost believed him, and then I didn't.

"You're fooling with me."

"On the contrary," he said real soft. "Jesse Still is fooling with *me*, although he doesn't mean to. We've never met." He didn't exactly look

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nervous, but he looked impatient. He climbed in the Stude and started the engine. It purred like racing tune. "This is a large and awfully complex world," he said, "and Mr. Still will probably tell you the same. I've been told we look like brothers."

I wanted to say more, but he waved real friendly and pulled away. The flat and racey back end of the Hawk reflected one slash of sunlight, then rolled into shadow. If I'd had a hot car, I'd have gone out hunting him. It wouldn't have done a lick of good, but doing something would be better than doing nothing.

I stood sort of shaking and amazed. Life had just changed somehow, and it wasn't going to change back. There wasn't a thing in the world to do, so I went to get some supper.

The Dog had signed in at the café:

Road Dog
The Bobbsey Twins Attend The Motor Races

And — I sat chewing roast beef and mashed potatoes.

And — I saw how the guy in the Hawk might be lying, and that Jesse was a twin.

And — I finally saw what a chancy, dicey world this was, because without meaning to, exactly, and without even knowing it was happening, I had just run up against The Road Dog.

It was a night of dreams. Dreams wouldn't let me go. The dancing ghost tried to tell me Jesse was triplets. The ghosts among the crosses begged rides into nowhere, rides down the long tunnel of night that ran past lands of dreams, but never turned off to those lands. It all came back: the crazy summer, the running, running, running behind the howl of engines. The Road Dog drawled with Jesse's voice, and then The Dog spoke cultured. The girl at the five-and-dime held out a gentle hand, then pulled it back. I dreamed of a hundred roadside joints, bars, cafés, old-fashioned filling stations with grease pits. I dreamed of winter wind, and the dark, dark days of winter; and of nights when you hunch in your room because it's a chore too big to bundle up and go outside.

I woke to an early dawn and slurped coffee at the bakery, which kept open because they had to make morning doughnuts. The land lay all

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around me, but it had nothing to say. I counted my money and figured miles.

I climbed in the Desoto, thinking I had never got around to giving it a name. The road unreeled toward the west. It ended in Seattle, where I sold my car. Everybody said there was going to be a war, and I wasn't doing anything anyway. I joined the Navy.

III

WHAT WITH him burying cars and raising hell, Jesse never wrote to me in summer. He was surely faithful in winter, though. He wrote long letters printed in a clumsy hand. He tried to cheer me up, and so did Matt Simons.

The Navy sent me to boot camp and diesel school, then to a motor pool in San Diego. I worked there three and a half years, sometimes even working on ships if the ships weren't going anywhere. A sunny land and smiling ladies lay all about, but the ladies mostly fell in love by ten at night and got over it by dawn. Women in the bars were younger and prettier than back home. There was enough clap to go around.

"The business is growing like Jimsonweed," Jesse wrote toward Christmas of '62. "I buried fourteen cars this summer, and one of them was a Kraut." He wrote a whole page about his morals. It didn't seem right to stick a crap-crate in the ground beside real cars. At the same time, it was bad business not to. He opened a special corner of the cemetery, and pretended it was exclusive for foreign iron.

"And Mike Tarbush got to drinking," he wrote. "I'm sad to say we planted Judith."

Mike never had a minute's trouble with that Merc. Judith behaved like a perfect lady until Mike turned upside down. He backed across a parking lot at night, rather hasty, and drove backward up the guy wire of a power pole. It was the only rollover wreck in history that happened at twenty miles an hour.

"Mike can't stop discussing it," Jesse wrote. "He's never caught The Dog, neither, but he ain't stopped trying. He wheeled in here in a beefed-up '57 Olds called Sally. It goes like stink and looks like a Hereford."

Home seemed far away, though it couldn't have been more than thirty-six hours by road for a man willing to hang over the wheel. I wanted to take

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a leave and drive home, but knew it better not happen. Once I got there, I'd likely stay.

"George Pierson at the feedstore says he's going to file a paternity suit against Potato," Jesse wrote. "The pups are cute, and there's a family resemblance."

It came to me then why I was homesick. I surely missed the land, but even more, I missed the people. Back home, folks were important enough that you knew their names. When somebody got messed up or killed, you felt sorry. In California, nobody knew nobody. They just swept up broken glass and moved right along. I should have meshed right in. I had made my rating and was pushing a rich man's car, a '57 hemi Chrysler, but never felt it fit.

"Don't pay it any mind," Jesse wrote when I told about meeting Road Dog. "I've heard about a guy who looks the same as me. Sometimes stuff like that happens."

And that was all he ever did say.

Nineteen sixty-three ended happy and hopeful. Matt Simons wrote a letter. Sam Winder bought a big Christmas card, and everybody signed it with little messages. Even my old boss at the filling station signed, "Merry Xmas, Jed — Keep It Between The Fence Posts." My boss didn't hold it against me that I left. In Montana a guy is supposed to be free to find out what he's all about.

Christmas of '63 saw Jesse pleased as a bee in clover. A lady named Sarah moved in with him. She waitressed at the café, and Jesse's letter ran pretty short. He'd put twenty-three cars under that year, and bought more acreage. He ordered a genuine marble gravestone for Miss Molly. "Sue Ellen is a real darling," Jesse wrote about the Linc. "That marker like to weighed a ton. We just about bent a back axle bringing it from the railroad."

From Christmas of '63 to January of '64 was just a few days, but they marked an awful downturn for Jesse. His letter was more real to me than all the diesels in San Diego.

He drew black borders all around the pages. The letter started out O.K., but went downhill. "Sarah moved out and into a rented room," he wrote. "I reckon I was just too much to handle." He didn't explain, but I did my own reckoning. I could imagine that it was Jesse, plus two cats and two dogs trying to get into a ten-wide-fifty trailer, that got to Sarah. "I think she misses me," he wrote, "but I expect she'll have to bear it."

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Then the letter got just awful.

"A pack of wolves came through from Canada," Jesse wrote. They picked off old Potato like a berry from a bush. Me and Mike found tracks, and a little blood in the snow."

I sat in the summery dayroom surrounded by sailors shooting pool and playing Ping-Pong. I imagined the snow and ice of home. I imagined old Potato nosing around in his dumb and happy way, looking for rabbits or lifting his leg. Maybe he even wagged his tail when that first wolf came into view. I sat blinking tears, ready to bawl over a dog, and then I did, and to hell with it.

The world was changing, and it wouldn't change back. I put in for sea duty one more time, and the chief warrant who ramrodded that motor pool turned it down again. He claimed we kept the world safe by wrenching engines.

"The '62 Dodge is emerging as the car of choice for people in a hurry." Matt Simons wrote that in February '64, knowing I'd understand that nobody could tell which cars would be treasured until they had a year or two on them. "It's an extreme winter," he wrote, "and it's taking its toll on many of us. Mike has now learned not to punch a policeman. He's doing ten days. Sam Winder managed to roll a Jeep, and neither he, nor I, can figure out how a man can roll a Jeep. Sam has a broken arm, and lost two toes to frost. He was trapped under the wreck. It took awhile to pull him out. Brother Jesse is in the darkest sort of mood. He comes and goes in an irregular manner, but the Linc sits outside the pool hall on most days.

"And for myself," Matt wrote, "I think, come summer, I'll drop some revs. My flaming youth seems to be giving way to other interests. A young woman named Nancy started teaching at the school. Until now, I thought I was a confirmed bachelor."

A postcard came the end of February. The postmark said "Cheyenne, Wyoming," way down in the southeast corner of the state. It was written fancy. Nobody could mistake that fine, spidery hand. It read:

Road Dog
Run and run as fast as he can,
He can't find who is the Gingerbread Man

* * *

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The picture on the card had been taken from an airplane. It showed an oval racetrack where cars chased each other round and round. I couldn't figure why Jesse sent it, but it had to be Jesse. Then it came to me that Jesse was The Road Dog. Then it came to me that he wasn't. The Road Dog was too slick. He wrote real delicate, and Jesse only printed real clumsy. On the other hand, The Road Dog didn't know me from Adam's off ox. Somehow it *had* to be Jesse.

"We got snow nut-deep to a tall palm tree," Jesse wrote at about the same time, "and Chip is failing. He's off his feed. He don't even tease the kitties. Chip just can't seem to stop mourning."

I had bad premonitions. Chip was sensitive. I feared he wouldn't be around by the time I got back home, and my fear proved right. Chip held off until the first warm sun of spring, and then he died while napping in the shade of the bulldozer. When Jesse sent a quick note telling me, I felt pretty bad, but had been expecting it. Chip had a good heart. I figured now he was with Potato, romping in the hills somewhere. I knew that was a bunch of crap, but that's just the way I chose to figure it.

They say a man can get used to anything, but maybe some can't. Day after day, and week after week, California weather nagged. Sometimes a puny little dab of weather dribbled in from the Pacific, and people hollered it was storming. Sometimes temperatures dropped toward the fifties, and people trotted around in thick sweaters and coats. It was almost a relief when that happened, because everybody put on their shirts. In three years, I'd seen more woman skin than a normal man sees in a lifetime, and more tattoos on men. The chief warrant at the motor pool had the only tattoo in the world called "worm's-eye view of a pig's butt in the moonlight."

In autumn '64, with one more year to pull, I took a two-week leave and headed north just chasing weather. It showed up first in Oregon with rain, and more in Washington. I got hassled on the Canadian border by a distressful little guy who thought, what with the war, that I wanted political asylum.

I chased on up to Calgary, where matters got chill and wholesome. Wind worked through the mountains like it wanted to drive me south toward home. Elk and moose and porcupines went about their business. Red-tailed hawks circled. I slid on over to Edmonton, chased on east to Kaskatoon, then dropped south through the Dakotas. In Williston, I had a terrible want

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to cut and run for home, but didn't dare.

The Road Dog showed up all over the place, but the messages were getting strange. At a bar in Amidon:

Road Dog
Taking Kentucky Windage

At a hamburger joint in Belle Fourche:

Road Dog
Chasing his tail

At a restaurant in Redbird:

Road Dog
Flea and flee as much as we can
We'll soon find who is the Gingerbread Man

In a poolroom in Fort Collins:

Road Dog
Home home on derange

Road Dog, or Jesse, was too far south. The Dog had never showed up in Colorado before. At least, nobody ever heard of such.

My leave was running out. There was nothing to do except sit over the wheel. I dropped on south to Albuquerque, hung a right, and headed back to the big city. All along the road, I chewed a dreadful fear for Jesse. Something bad was happening, and that didn't seem fair, because something good went on between me and the Chrysler. We reached an understanding. The Chrysler came alive and began to hum. All that poor car had ever needed was to look at road. It had been raised among traffic and poodles, but needed long sight-distances and bears.

WHEN I got back, there seemed no way out of writing a letter to Matt Simons, even if it was borrowing trouble. It took evening after evening of gnawing the end of a pencil. I hated to tell about Miss Molly, and about the dancing ghost, and about my fears for Jesse. A man is supposed to keep his problems to himself.

At the same time, Matt was educated. Maybe he could give Jesse a hand if he knew all of it. The letter came out pretty thick. I mailed it thinking

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Matt wasn't likely to answer real soon. Autumn deepened to winter back home, and everybody would be busy.

So I worked and waited. There was an old White Mustang with a fifth wheel left over from the last war. It was a lean and hungry-looking animal, and slightly marvelous. I overhauled the engine, then dropped the tranny and adapted a ten-speed Roadranger. When I got that truck running smooth as a Baptist's mouth, the Navy surveyed it and sold it for scrap.

"Ghost cars are a tradition," Matt wrote toward the back of October, "and I'd be hard pressed to say they are not real. I recall being passed by an Auburn boat-tail about 3:00 A.M. on a summer day. That happened ten years ago. I was about your age, which means there was not an Auburn boat-tail in all of Montana. That car died in the early thirties.

"And we all hear stories of huge old headlights overtaking in the mist, stories of Mercers and Duesenbergs and Bugattis. I try to believe the stories are true, because, in a way, it would be a shame if they were not.

"The same for road ghosts. I've never seen a ghost who looked like Jesse. The ghosts I've seen might not have been ghosts. To paraphrase an expert, they may have been a trapped beer belch, an undigested hamburger, or blowing mist. On the other hand, maybe not. They certainly seemed real at the time.

"As for Jesse — we have a problem here. In a way, we've had it for a long while, but only since last winter have matters become solemn. Then your letter arrives, and matters become mysterious. Jesse has — or had — a twin brother. One night when we were carousing, he told me that, but he also said his brother was dead. Then he swore me to a silence I must now break."

Matt went on to say that I must never, never say anything. He figured something was going on between brothers. He figured it must run deep.

"There is something uncanny about twins," Matt wrote. "What great matters are joined in the womb? When twins enter the world, they learn and grow the way all of us do; but some communication (or communion) surely happens before birth. A clash between brothers is a terrible thing. A clash between twins may spell tragedy."

Matt went on to tell how Jesse was going over the edge with road games, only, the games stayed close to home. All during the summer, Jesse would head out, roll fifty or a hundred miles, and come home scorching like drawn by a string. Matt guessed the postcard I'd gotten from Jesse in February was part of the game, and it was the last time Jesse had been very far from home.

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Matt figured Jesse used tracing paper to imitate the Road Dog's writing. He also figured Road Dog had to be Jesse's brother.

"It's obvious," Matt wrote, "that Jesse's brother is still alive, and is only metaphorically dead to Jesse. There are look-alikes in this world, but you have reported identical twins."

Matt told how Jesse drove so crazy, even Mike would not run with him. That was bad enough, but it seemed the graveyard had sort of moved in on Jesse's mind. That graveyard was no longer just something to do. Jesse swapped around until he came up with a tractor and mower. Three times that summer, he trimmed the graveyard and straightened the markers. He dusted and polished Miss Molly's headstone.

"It's past being a joke," Matt wrote, "or a sentimental indulgence. Jesse no longer drinks, and no longer hells around in a general way. He either runs or tends the cemetery. I've seen other men search for a ditch, but never in such bizarre fashion."

Jesse had been seen on his knees, praying before Miss Molly's grave.

"Or perhaps he was praying for himself, or for Chip." Matt wrote. "Chip is buried beside Miss Molly. The graveyard has to be seen to be believed. Who would ever think so many machines would be so dear to so many men?"

Then Matt went on to say he was going to "inquire in various places" that winter. "There are ways to trace Jesse's brother," Matt wrote, "and I am very good at that sort of research." He said it was about the only thing he could still do for Jesse.

"Because," Matt wrote, "I seem to have fallen in love with a romantic. Nancy wants a June wedding. I look forward to another winter alone, but it will be an easy wait. Nancy is rather old-fashioned, and I find that I'm old-fashioned as well. I will never regret my years spent helling around, but am glad they are now in the past."

Back home, winter deepened. At Christmas a long letter came from Jesse, and some of it made sense. "I put eighteen cars under this summer. Business fell off because I lost my hustle. You got to scooch around a good bit, or you don't make contacts. I may start advertising.

"And the tabbies took off. I forgot to slop them regular, so now they're mousing in a barn on Jimmy Come Lately Road. Mike says I ought to get another dog, but my heart isn't in it."

Then the letter went into plans for the cemetery. Jesse talked some

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grand ideas. He thought a nice wrought-iron gate might be showy, and bring in business. He thought of finding a truck that would haul "deceased" cars. "On the other hand," he wrote, "if a guy don't care enough to find a tow, maybe I don't want to plant his iron." He went on for a good while about morals, but a lawyer couldn't understand it. He seemed to be saying something about respect for Miss Molly, and Betty Lou, and Judith. "Sue Ellen is a real hummer," he wrote about the Linc. "She's got two hundred thousand I know about, plus whatever went on before."

Which meant Jesse was piling up about seventy thousand miles a year, and that didn't seem too bad. Truck drivers put up a hundred thousand. Of course, they make a living at it.

Then the letter got so crazy it was hard to credit.

"I got The Road Dog figured out. There's two little kids. Their mama reads to them, and they play tag. The one that don't get caught gets to be the Gingerbread Man. This all come together because I ran across a bunch of kids down on the Colorado line. I was down that way to call on a lady I once knew, but she moved, and I said what the hell, and hung around a few days, and that's what clued me to The Dog. The kids were at a Sunday-school picnic, and I was napping across the car seat. Then a preacher's wife came over and saw I wasn't drunk, but the preacher was there, too, and they invited me. I eased over to the picnic, and everybody made me welcome. Anyway, those kids were playing, and I heard the gingerbread business, and I figured The Dog is from Colorado."

The last page of the letter was just as scary. Jesse took kids' crayons and drew the front ends of the Linc and Miss Molly. There was a tail that was probably Potato's, sticking out from behind the picture of Miss Molly, and everything was centered around the picture of a marker that said "R.I.P. Road Dog."

But — there weren't any little kids. Jesse had not been to Colorado. Jesse had been tending that graveyard, and staying close to home. Jesse played make-believe, or else Matt Simons lied; and there was no reason for Matt to lie. Something bad, bad wrong was going on with Jesse.

There was no help for it. I did my time and wrote a letter every month or six weeks pretending everything was normal. I wrote about what we'd do when I got home, and about the Chrysler. Maybe that didn't make much sense, but Jesse was important to me. He was a big part of what I remembered about home.

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At the end of April, a postcard came, this time from Havre. "The Dog is after me. I feel it." It was just a plain old postcard. No picture.

Matt wrote in May, mostly his own plans. He busied himself building a couple of rooms onto his place. "Nancy and I do not want a family right away," he wrote, "but someday we will." He wrote a bubbly letter with a feel of springtime to it.

"I almost forgot my main reason for writing," the letter said. "Jesse comes from around Boulder, Colorado. His parents are long dead, ironically in a car wreck. His mother was a schoolteacher, his father a librarian. Those people, who lived such quiet lives, somehow produced a hellion like Jesse, and Jesse's brother. That's the factual side of the matter.

"The human side is so complex it will not commit to paper. In fact, I do not trust what I know. When you get home next fall, we'll discuss it."

The letter made me sad and mad. Sad because I wasn't getting married, and mad because Matt didn't think I'd keep my mouth shut. Then I thought better of it. Matt didn't trust himself. I did what any gentleman would do, and sent him and Nancy a nice gravy boat for the wedding.

In late July, Jesse sent another postcard. "He's after me; I'm after him. If I ain't around when you get back, don't fret. Stuff happens. It's just a matter of chasing road."

Summer rolled on. The Navy released "nonessential personnel" in spite of the war. I put four years in the outfit and got called nonessential. Days choked past like a rig with fouled injectors. One good thing happened. My old boss moved his station to the outskirts of town and started an IH dealership. He straight-out wrote how he needed a diesel mechanic. I felt hopeful thoughts, and dark ones.

In September, I became a veteran who qualified for an overseas ribbon, because of work on ships that later on went somewhere. Now I could join the Legion post back home, which was maybe the payoff. They had the best pool table in the county.

"Gents," I said to the boys at the motor pool, "it's been a distinct by-God pleasure enjoying your company, and don't never come to Montana, 'cause she's a heartbreaker." The Chrysler and me lit out like a kyoodle of pups.

It would have been easier to run to Salt Lake, then climb the map to Havre, but notions pushed. I slid east to Las Cruces, then popped north to Boulder with the idea of tracing Jesse. The Chrysler hummed and chewed up road. When I got to Boulder, the notion turned hopeless. There were too

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many people. I didn't even know where to start asking.

It's no big job to fool yourself. Above Boulder, it came to me how I'd been pointing for Sheridan all along, and not even Sheridan. I pointed toward a girl who smiled at me four years ago.

I found her working at a hardware, and she wasn't wearing any rings. I blushed around a little bit, then got out of there to catch my breath. I thought of how Jesse took whatever time was needed when he bought the Linc. It looked like this would take awhile.

My pockets were crowded with mustering-out pay and money for unused leave. I camped in a ten-dollar motel. It took three days to get acquainted, then we went to a show and supper afterward. Her name was Linda. Her father was a Mormon. That meant a year of courting, but it's not all that far from north Montana to Sheridan.

I had to get home and get employed, which would make the Mormon happy. On Saturday afternoon, Linda and I went back to the same old movie, but this time we held hands. Before going home, she kissed me once, real gentle. That made up for those hard times in San Diego. It let me know I was back with my own people.

I drove downtown all fired-up with visions. It was way too early for bed, and I cared nothing for a beer. A run-down café sat on the outskirts. I figured pie and coffee.

The Dog had signed in. His writing showed faint, like the wall had been scrubbed. Newer stuff scrabbled over it.

Road Dog
Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Lonely pups as pups can be
For each other had to wait
Down beside the churchyard gate.

The café sort of slumbered. Several old men lined the counter. Four young gearheads sat at a table and talked fuel injection. The old men yawned and put up with it. Faded pictures of old racing cars hung along the walls. The young guys sat beneath a picture of the Bluebird. That car held the land speed record of 301.29 m.p.h. This was a racer's café, and had been for a long, long time.

The waitress was graying and motherly. She tsked and tished over the old men as much as she did the young ones. Her eyes held that long-

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distance prairie look, a look knowing wind and fire and hard times, stuff that either breaks people or leaves them wise. Matt Simons might get that look in another twenty years. I tried to imagine Linda when she became the waitress's age, and it wasn't bad imagining.

Pictures of quarter-mile cars hung back of the counter, and pictures of street machines hung on each side of the door. Fifties hot rods scorched beside worked-up stockers. Some mighty rowdy iron crowded that wall. One picture showed a Golden Hawk. I walked over, and in one corner was the name "Still" — written in The Road Dog's hand. It shouldn't have been scary.

I went back to the counter shaking. A nice-looking old gent nursed coffee. His hands wore knuckles busted by a thousand slipped wrenches. Grease was worked in deep around his eyes, the way it gets after years and years when no soap made will touch it. You could tell he'd been a steady man. His eyes were clear as a kid.

"Mister," I said, "and beg pardon for bothering you. Do you know anything about that Studebaker?" I pointed to the wall.

"You ain't bothering me," he said, "but I'll tell you when you do." He tapped the side of his head like trying to ease a gear in place, then he started talking engine specs on the Stude.

"I mean the man who owns it."

The old man probably liked my haircut, which was short. He liked it that I was raised right. Young guys don't always pay old men much mind.

"You still ain't bothering me." He turned to the waitress. "Sue," he said, "has Johnny Still been in?"

She turned from cleaning the pie case, and she looked toward the young guys like she feared for them. You could tell she was no big fan of engines. "It's been the better part of a year, maybe more." She looked down the line of old men. "I was fretting about him just the other day. . . ." She let it hang. Nobody said anything. "He comes and goes so quiet, you might miss him."

"I don't miss him a hell of a lot," one of the young guys said. The guy looked like a duck, and had a voice like a sparrow. His fingernails were too clean. That proved something.

"Because Johnny blew you out," another young guy said. "Johnny *always* blew you out."

"Because he's crazy," the first guy said. "There's noisy-crazy and quiet-crazy. The guy is a spook."

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"He's going through something," the waitress said, and said it kind. "Johnny's taken a lot of loss. He's the type who grieves." She looked at me like she expected an explanation.

"I'm friends with his brother," I told her. "Maybe Johnny and his brother don't get along."

The old man looked at me rather strange. "You go back quite a ways," he told me. "Jesse's been dead a good long time."

I thought I'd pass out. My hands started shaking, and my legs felt too weak to stand. Beyond the window of the café, red light came from a neon sign, and inside the café, everybody sat quiet, waiting to see if I was crazy, too. I sort of picked at my pie. One of the young guys moved real uneasy. He loafed toward the door, maybe figuring he'd need a shotgun. The other three young ones looked confused.

"No offense," I said to the old man, "but Jesse Still is alive. Up on the highline. We run together."

"Jesse Still drove a damn old Hudson Terraplane into the South Platte River in spring of '52, maybe '53." The old man said it real quiet. "He popped a tire when not real sober."

"Which is why Johnny doesn't drink," the waitress said. "At least, I expect that's the reason."

"And now you are bothering me." The old man looked to the waitress, and she was as full of questions as he was.

Nobody ever felt more hopeless or scared. These folks had no reason to tell this kind of yarn. "Jesse is sort of roughhouse." My voice was only whispering. It wouldn't make enough sound. "Jesse made his reputation helling around."

"You've got that part right," the old man told me, "and youngster, I don't give a tinker's damn if you believe me or not, but Jesse Still is dead."

I saw what it had to be, but seeing isn't always believing. "Thank you, mister," I whispered to the old man, "and thank you, ma'am," to the waitress. Then I hauled out of there leaving them with something to discuss.

A TERRIBLE FEAR rolled with me, because of Jesse's last postcard. He said he might not be home, and now that could mean more than it said. The Chrysler bettered its reputation, and we just flew. From the Montana line to Shelby is eight hours on a clear

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day. You can wail it in seven, or maybe six and a half if a deer doesn't tangle with your front end. I was afraid, and confused, and getting mad. Me and Linda were just to the point of hoping for an understanding, and now I was going to get killed running over a porcupine or into a heifer. The Chrysler blazed like a hound on a hot scent. At eighty the pedal kept wanting to dig deep and really howl.

The nighttime road yells danger. Shadows crawl over everything. What jumps into your headlights may be real, and may be not. Metal crosses hold little clusters of dark flowers on their arms, and the land rolls out beneath the moon. Buttes stand like great ships anchored in the plains, and riverbeds run like dry ink. Come spring, they'll flow; but in September, all flow is in the road.

The dancing ghost picked me up on Highway 3 outside Comanche, but this time he wasn't dancing. He stood on the berm, and no mist tied him in place. He gave the old road sign for "roll 'em." Beyond Columbia, he showed up again. His mouth moved like he was yelling me along, and his face twisted with as much fear as my own.

That gave me reason to hope. I'd never known Jesse to be afraid like that, so maybe there was a mistake. Maybe the dancing ghost wasn't the ghost of Jesse. I hung over the wheel and forced myself to think of Linda. When I thought of her, I couldn't bring myself to get crazy. Highway 3 is not much of a road, but that's no bother. I can drive anything with wheels over any road ever made. The dancing ghost kept showing up and beckoning, telling me to scorch. I told myself the damn ghost had no judgment, or he wouldn't be a ghost in the first place.

That didn't keep me from pushing faster, but it wasn't fast enough to satisfy the roadside. They came out of the mist, or out of the ditches; crowds and clusters of ghosts standing pale beneath a weak moon. Some of them gossiped with each other. Some stood yelling me along. Maybe there was sense to it, but I had my hands full. If they were trying to help, they sure weren't doing it. They just made me get my back up, and think of dropping revs.

Maybe the ghosts held a meeting and studied out the problem. They could see a clear road, but I couldn't. The dancing ghost showed up on Highway 12 and gave me "thumbs up" for a clear road. I didn't believe a word of it, and then I really didn't believe what showed in my mirrors. Headlights closed like I was standing. My feelings said that all of this had

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happened before; except, last time, there was only one set of headlights.

It was Miss Molly and Betty Lou that brought me home. Miss Molly overtook, sweeping past with a lane change smooth and sober as an Adventist. The high, slaunch-forward form of Miss Molly thrummed with business. She wasn't blowing sparks or showing off. She wasn't playing Gingerbread Man or tag.

Betty Lou came alongside so I could see who she was, then Betty Lou laid back a half mile. If we ran into a claim-jumping deputy, he'd have to chase her first; and more luck to him. Her headlights hovered back there like angels.

Miss Molly settled down a mile ahead of the Chrysler and stayed at that distance, no matter how hard I pressed. Twice before Great Falls, she spotted trouble, and her squinchy little brake lights hauled me down. Once it was an animal, and once it was busted road surface. Miss Molly and Betty Lou dropped me off before Great Falls, and picked me back up the minute I cleared town.

We ran the night like rockets. The roadside lay deserted. The dancing ghost stayed out of it, and so did the others. That let me concentrate, which proved a blessing. At those speeds a man don't have time to do deep thinking. The road rolls past, the hours roll, but you've got a racer's mind. No matter how tired you should be, you don't get tired until it's over.

I chased a ghost car northward while a fingernail moon moved across the sky. In deepest night the land turned silver. At speed, you don't think, but you do have time to feel. The farther north we pushed, the more my feelings went to despair. Maybe Miss Molly thought the same, but everybody did all they could.

The Chrysler was a howler, and Lord knows where the top end lay. I buried the needle. Even accounting for speedometer error, we burned along in the low half of the second century. We made Highway 2 and Shelby around three in the morning, then hung a left. In just about no time, I rolled home. Betty Lou dropped back and faded. Miss Molly blew sparks and purely flew out of sight. The sparks meant something. Maybe Miss Molly was still hopeful. Or maybe she knew we were too late.

Beneath that thin moon, mounded graves looked like dark surf across the acreage. No lights burned in the trailer, and the Linc showed nowhere. Even under the scant light, you could see snowy tops of mountains, and the

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perfectly straight markers standing at the head of each grave. A tent, big enough to hold a small revival, stood not far from the trailer. In my headlights a sign on the tent read "chapel." I fetched a flashlight from the glove box.

A dozen folding chairs stood in the chapel, and a podium served as an altar. Jesse had rigged up two sets of candles, so I lit some. Matt Simons had written that the graveyard had to be seen to be believed. Hanging on one side of the tent was a sign reading "shrine," and all along that side hung road maps, and pictures of cars, and pictures of men standing beside their cars. There was a special display of odometers, with little cards beneath them: "330,938 miles "; "407,000 miles"; "half a million miles, more or less." These were the championship cars, the all-time best at piling up road, and those odometers would make even a married man feel lonesome. You couldn't look at them without thinking of empty roads and empty nights.

Even with darkness spreading across the cemetery, nothing felt worse than the inside of the tent. I could believe that Jesse took it serious, and had tried to make it nice, but couldn't believe anyone else would buy it.

The night was not too late for owls, and nearly silent wings swept past as I left the tent. I walked to Miss Molly's grave, half-expecting ghostly headlights. Two small markers stood beside a real fine marble headstone.

Potato
Happy-go-sloppy and good
Rest In Peace Wherever You Are

Chip
A dandy little sidekicker
Running With Potato

From a distance, I could see piled dirt where the dozer had dug new graves. I stepped cautious toward the dozer, not knowing why, but knowing it had to happen.

Two graves stood open like little garages, and the front ends of the Linc and the Hawk poked out. The Linc's front bumper shone spotless, but the rest of the Linc looked tough and experienced. Dents and dings crowded the sides, and cracked glass starred the windows.

The Hawk stood sparkly, ready to come roaring from the grave. Its glass

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shone washed and clean before my flashlight. I thought of what I heard in Sheridan, and thought of the first time I'd seen the Hawk. It hadn't changed. The Hawk looked like it had just been driven off a showroom floor.

Nobody in his right mind would want to look in those two cars, but it wasn't a matter of "want." Jesse, or Johnny — if that's who it was — had to be here someplace. It was certain-sure he needed help. When I looked, the Hawk sat empty. My flashlight poked against the glass of the Linc. Jesse lay there, taking his last nap across a car seat. His long black hair had turned gray. He had always been thin, but now he was skin and bones. Too many miles, and no time to eat. Creases around his eyes came from looking at road, but now the creases were deep like an old man's. His eyes showed that he was dead. They were open only a little bit, but open enough.

I couldn't stand to be alone with such a sight. In less than fifteen minutes, I stood banging on Matt Simon's door. Matt finally answered, and Nancy showed up behind him. She was in her robe. She stood taller than Matt, and sleepier. She looked blonde and Swedish. Matt didn't know whether to be mad or glad. Then I got my story pieced together, and he really woke up.

"Dr. Jekyll has finally dealt with Mr. Hyde," he said in a low voice to Nancy. "Or maybe the other way around." To me, he said, "That may be a bad joke, but it's not ill meant." He went to get dressed. "Call Mike," he said to me. "Drunk or sober, I want him there."

Nancy showed me the phone. Then she went to the bedroom to talk with Matt. I could hear him soothing her fears. When Mike answered, he was sleepy and sober, but he woke up stampeding.

Deep night and a thin moon is a perfect time for ghosts, but none showed up as Matt rode with me back to the graveyard. The Chrysler loafed. There was no need for hurry.

I told Matt what I'd learned in Sheridan.

"That matches what I heard," he said, "and we have two mysteries. The first mystery is interesting, but it's no longer important. Was John Still pretending to be Jesse Still, or was Jesse pretending to be John?"

"If Jesse drove into a river in '53, then it has to be John." I didn't like what I said, because Jesse was real. The best actor in the world couldn't pretend that well. My sorrow choked me, but I wasn't ashamed.

Matt seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "We don't know how

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long the game went on," he said real quiet. "We never will know. John could have been playing at being Jesse way back in '53."

That got things tangled, and I felt resentful. Things were complicated enough. Me and Matt had just lost a friend, and now Matt was talking like that was the least interesting part.

"Makes no difference whether he was John or Jesse," I told Matt. "He was Jesse when he died. He's laying across the seat in Jesse's car. Figure it any way you want, but we're talking about Jesse."

"You're right," Matt said. "Also, you're wrong. We're talking about someone who was both." Matt sat quiet for a minute, figuring things out. I told myself it was just as well that he'd married a schoolteacher. "Assume, for the sake of argument," he said, "that John was playing Jesse in '53. John drove into the river, and people believed they were burying Jesse.

"Or, for the sake of argument, assume that it was Jesse in '53. In that case the game started with John's grief. Either way the game ran for many years." Matt was getting at something, but he always has to go roundabout.

"After years, John, or Jesse, disappeared. There was only a man who was both John and Jesse. That's the reason it makes no difference who died in '53."

Matt looked through the car window into the darkness like he expected to discover something important. "This is a long and lonesome country," he said. "The biggest mystery is: Why? The answer may lie in the mystery of twins, or it may be as simple as a man reaching into the past for happy memories. At any rate, one brother dies, and the survivor keeps his brother alive by living his brother's life, as well as his own. Think of the planning, the elaborate schemes, the near self-deception. Think of how often the roles shifted. A time must have arrived when that lonely man could not even remember who he was."

The answer was easy, and I saw it. Jesse, or John, chased the road to find something they'd lost on the road. They lost their parents and each other. I didn't say a damn word. Matt was making me mad, but I worked at forgiving him. He was handling his own grief, and maybe he didn't have a better way.

"And so he invented The Road Dog," Matt said. "That kept the personalities separate. The Road Dog was a metaphor to make him proud. Perhaps it might confuse some of the ladies, but there isn't a man ever born who wouldn't understand it."

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I remembered long nights and long roads. I couldn't fault his reasoning.

"At the same time," Matt said, "the metaphor served the twins. They could play road games with the innocence of children, maybe even replay memories of a time when their parents were alive and the world seemed warm. John played The Road Dog, and Jesse chased; and by God, so did the rest of us. It was a magnificent metaphor."

"If it was that blamed snappy," I said, "how come it fell to pieces? For the past year, it seems like Jesse's been running away from The Dog."

"The metaphor began to take over. The twins began to defend against each other," Matt said. "I've been watching it all along, but couldn't understand what was happening. John Still was trying to take over Jesse, and Jesse was trying to take over John."

"It worked for a long time," I said, "and then it didn't work. What's the kicker?"

"Our own belief," Matt said. "We all believed in The Road Dog. When all of us believed, John was forced to become stronger."

"And Jesse fought him off?"

"Successfully," Matt said. "All this year, when Jesse came firing out of town, rolling fifty miles, and firing back, I thought it was Jesse's problem. Now I see that John was trying to get free, get back on the road, and Jesse was dragging him back. This was a struggle between real men, maybe titans in the oldest sense, but certainly not imitations."

"It was a guy handling his problems."

"That's an easy answer. We can't know what went on with John," Matt said, "but we know some of what went on with Jesse. He tried to love a woman, Sarah, and failed. He lost his dogs — which doesn't sound like much, unless your dogs are all you have. Jesse fought defeat by building his other metaphor, which was that damned cemetery." Matt's voice got husky. He'd been holding in his sorrow, but his sorrow started coming through. It made me feel better about him.

"I think the cemetery was Jesse's way of answering John, or denying that he was vulnerable. He needed a symbol. He tried to protect his loves and couldn't. He couldn't even protect his love for his brother. That cemetery is the last bastion of Jesse's love." Matt looked like he was going to cry, and I felt the same.

"Cars can't hurt you," Matt said. "Only bad driving hurts you. The cemetery is a symbol for protecting one of the few loves you can protect.

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That's not saying anything bad about Jesse. That's saying something with sadness for all of us."

I slowed to pull onto Jesse's place. Mike's Olds sat by the trailer. Lights were on in the trailer, but no other lights showed anywhere.

"Men build all kinds of worlds in order to defeat fear and loneliness," Matt said. "We give and take as we build those worlds. One must wonder how much Jesse, and John, gave in order to take the little that they got."

We climbed from the Chrysler as autumn wind moved across the graveyard and felt its way toward my bones. The moon lighted faces of grave markers, but not enough that you could read them. Mike had the bulldozer warming up. It stood and puttered, and darkness felt best, and Mike knew it. The headlights were off. Far away on Highway 2, an engine wound tight and squalling, and it seemed like echoes of engines whispered among the graves. Mike stood huge as a grizzly.

"I've shot horses that looked healthier than you two guys," he said, but said it sort of husky.

Matt motioned toward the bulldozer. "This is illegal."

"Nobody ever claimed it wasn't." Mike was ready to fight if a fight was needed. "Anybody who don't like it can turn around and walk."

"I like it," Matt said. "It's fitting and proper. But if we're caught, there's hell to pay."

"I like most everything and everybody," Mike said, "except the government. They paw a man to death while he's alive, then keep pawing his corpse. I'm saving Jesse a little trouble."

"They like to know that he's dead and what killed him."

"Sorrow killed him," Mike said. "Let it go at that."

Jesse killed himself, timing his tiredness and starvation just right, but I was willing to let it go, and Matt was, too.

"We'll go along with you," Matt said. "But they'll sell this place for taxes. Somebody will start digging sometime."

"Not for years and years. It's deeded to me. Jesse fixed up papers. They're on the kitchen table." Mike turned toward the trailer. "We're going to do this right, and there's not much time."

We found a blanket and a quilt in the trailer. Mike opened a kitchen drawer and pulled out snapshots. Some looked pretty new, and some were faded: a man and woman in old-fashioned clothes, a picture of two young boys in Sunday suits, pictures of cars and road signs, and pictures of two

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women who were maybe Sue Ellen and Sarah. Mike piled them like a deck of cards, snapped a rubber band around them, and checked the trailer. He picked up a pair of pale yellow sunglasses that some racers use for night driving. "You guys see anything else?"

"His dogs," Matt said. "He had pictures of his dogs."

We found them under a pillow, and it didn't pay to think why they were there. Then we went to the Linc and wrapped Jesse real careful in the blanket. We spread the quilt over him, and laid his stuff on the floor beside the accelerator. Then Mike remembered something. He half-unwrapped Jesse, went through his pockets, then wrapped him back up. He took Jesse's keys and left them hanging in the ignition.

The three of us stood beside the Linc, and Matt cleared his throat.

"It's my place to say it," Mike told him. "This was my best friend." Mike took off his cap. Moonlight lay thin on his bald head.

"A lot of preachers will be glad this man is gone, and that's one good thing you can say for him. He drove nice people crazy. This man was a hellion, pure and simple; but what folks don't understand is, hellions have their place. They put everything on the line over nothing very much. Most guys worry so much about dying, they never do any living. Jesse was so alive with living, he never gave dying any thought. This man would roll ninety just to get to a bar before it closed." Mike kind of choked up and stopped to listen. From the graveyard came the echoes of engines, and from Highway 2 rose the thrum of a straight-eight crankshaft whipping in its bed. Dim light covered the graveyard, like a hundred sets of parking lights and not the moon.

"This man kept adventure alive, when, everyplace else, it's dying. There was nothing ever smug or safe about this man. If he had fears, he laughed. This man never hit a woman or crossed a friend. He did tie the can on Betty Lou one night, but can't be blamed. It was really The Dog who did that one. Jesse never had a problem until he climbed into that Studebaker."

So Mike had known all along. At least Mike knew something.

"I could always run even with Jesse," Mike said, "but I never could beat The Dog. The Dog could clear any track. And in a damn Studebaker."

"But a very swift Studebaker," Matt muttered, like a Holy Roller answering the preacher.

"Bored and stroked and rowdy," Mike said, "and you can say the same for Jesse. Let that be the final word. Amen."

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IV

A LITTLE SPARK of flame dwelt at the stack of the dozer, and distant mountains lay white-capped and prophesied winter. Mike filled the graves quick. Matt got rakes and a shovel. I helped him mound the graves with only moonlight to go on, while Mike went to the trailer. He made coffee.

"Drink up and git," Mike told us when he poured the coffee. "Jesse's got some friends who need to visit, and it will be morning pretty quick."

"Let them," Matt said. "We're no hindrance."

"You're a smart man," Mike told Matt, "but your smartness makes you dumb. You started to hinder the night you stopped driving beyond your headlights." Mike didn't know how to say it kind, so he said it rough. His red mustache and bald head made him look like a pirate in a picture.

"You're saying that I'm getting old." Matt has known Mike long enough not to take offense.

"Me, too," Mike said, "but not that old. When you get old, you stop seeing them. Then you want to stop seeing them. You get afraid for your hide."

"You stop imagining?"

"Shitfire," Mike said, "you stop seeing. Imagination is something you use when you don't have eyes." He pulled a cigar out of his shirt pocket and was chewing it before he ever got it lit. "Ghosts have lost it all. Maybe they're the ones the Lord didn't love well enough. If you see them, but ain't one, maybe you're important."

Matt mulled that, and so did I. We've both wailed a lot of road for some sort of reason.

"They're kind of rough," Matt said about ghosts. "They hitch rides, but don't want 'em. I've stopped for them and got laughed at. They fool themselves, or maybe they don't."

"It's a young man's game," Matt said.

"It's a game guys got to play. Jesse played the whole deck. He was who he was, whenever he was it. That's the key. That's the reason you slug cops when you gotta. It looks like Jesse died old, but he lived young longer than most. That's the real mystery. How does a fella keep going?"

"Before we leave," I said, "how long did you know that Jesse was The Dog?"

"Maybe a year and a half. About the time he started running crazy."

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"And never said a word?"

Mike looked at me like something you'd wipe off your boot. "Learn to ride your own fence," he told me. "It was Jesse's business." Then he felt sorry for being rough. "Besides," he said, "we were having fun. I expect that's all over now."

Matt followed me to the Chrysler. We left the cemetery, feeling tired and mournful. I shoved the car onto Highway 2, heading toward Matt's place.

"Wring it out once for old times?"

"Putter along," Matt said. "I just entered the putter stage of life, and may as well practice doing it."

In my mirrors a stream of headlights showed, then vanished one by one as cars turned into the graveyard. The moon had left the sky. Over toward South Dakota was a suggestion of first faint morning light. Mounded graves lay at my elbow, and so did Canada. On my left the road south ran fine and fast as a man can go. Mist rose from the roadside ditches, and maybe there was movement in the mist, maybe not.

There's little more to tell. Through fall and winter and spring and summer, I drove to Sheridan. The Mormon turned out to be a pretty good man, for a Mormon. I kept at it, and drove through another autumn and another winter. Linda got convinced. We got married in the spring, and I expected trouble. Married people are supposed to fight, but nothing like that ever happened. We just worked hard, got our own place in a few years, and Linda birthed two girls. That disappointed the Mormon, but was a relief to me.

And in those seasons of driving, when the roads were good for twenty miles an hour in the snow, or eighty under sun, the road stood empty except for a couple times. Miss Molly showed up once early on to say a bridge was out. She might have showed up another time. Squinchy little taillights winked one night when it was late and I was highballing. Some guy jackknifed a Freightliner, and his trailer lay across the road.

But I saw no other ghosts. I'd like to say that I saw the twins, John and Jesse, standing by the road, giving the high sign or dancing, but it never happened.

I did think of Jesse, though, and thought of one more thing. If Matt was right, then I saw how Jesse had to die before I got home. He had to, because

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I believed in Road Dog. My belief would have been just enough to bring John forward, and that would have been fatal, too. If either one of them became too strong, they both of them lost. So Jesse had to do it.

The graveyard sank beneath the weather. Mike tended it for a while, but lost interest. Weather swept the mounds flat. Weed-covered markers tumbled to decay and dust, so that only one marble headstone stands solid beside Highway 2. The marker doesn't bend before the winter winds, nor does the little stone that me and Mike and Matt put there. It lays flat against the ground. You have to know where to look:

Road Dog
1931–1965
2 million miles, more or less
Run and run as fast as we can
We never can catch the Gingerbread Man

And now, even the great good cars are dead, or most of them. What with gas prices and wars and rumors of wars, the cars these days are all suspensions. They'll corner like a cat, but don't have the scratch of a cat; and maybe that's a good thing. The state posts fewer crosses.

Still, there are some howlers left out there, and some guys are still howling. I lie in bed of nights and listen to the scorch of engines along Highway 2. I hear them claw the darkness, stretching lonesome at the sky, scatting across the eternal land; younger guys running as young guys must; chasing each other, or chasing the land of dreams, or chasing into ghostland while hoping it ain't true — guys running into darkness chasing each other, or chasing something — chasing road.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 57

Since we spend so much time in our cars, we asked you to come up with vanity license plates for sf readers and writers. Many of you reported on plates you had seen. Nice and fine, but we wanted you to be a bit more creative than that. The entries that worked best were the ones that not only gave us the plates, but the drivers of the cars as well.

FIRST PRIZE (also known as Above and Beyond the Scope of the Contest Award) goes to Catherine Mintz of Philadelphia for giving us a small story in addition to license plates:

The Plates in the Convention Parking Lot

John was nervous. His car was bearing a proper plate — NEOFAN plus the number designation — but it was his first big con, and he knew he was green. He turned right as he entered the lot, cruising past ranks of cars with the coveted higher designations — close to the entrance, the SMOFs and BNFs, further along the simple IMAFANs. Then there were the special interest groups, the BLAKES7s, the DRWHOs — and a few wags with DRWHATs and DRWHENs — the TREKs with I, II, IIIs in addition to their own personal number. Lots of STNGs, DRAGONs — no DUNGEONs — and a host of GHOULs, GOREs, and DEMONs where the horror fans had bunched together. John found his slot and backed in, switched off the ingition and sat a moment. A fleet of standard saucers drifted by, on their way to the landing pad just beyond the swimming pool. I24C, U24C, then HE24C, SHE24C, and IT24C in a tight formation, green running lights flashing. He waited but THEY24C didn't show. It would be late, or had come earlier, John guessed. The GENCON orientation literature said the saucer crowd went everywhere together and membership was by invitation only. He got out of his car and stepped back hastily as a motocycle, plate FANAC, roared by, mimeo machine in its sidecar. John fitted his propeller beanie in place and squared his shoulders, reminding himself that everyone had gone to their first con sometime. He started up the steps to the hotel, murmuring the first level password to himself, "What's A LOC?" and wondering what it had been like before fandom really got organized.

SECOND PRIZE (the Best of the Rest) goes to Gail Sosinsky Wickman of Aurora, IL for these plates:

L N OLOY for Lester del Rey
3 LAWS for Isaac Asimov
OB1 K NO B for George Lucas
NCC 1701 for Gene Roddenberry
42 for Douglas Addams
JEFF T 5 for Harlan Ellison
LST CMEL for Cordwainer Smith
ZNOCIDE for Orson Scott Card
4EVR WAR for Joe Haldeman
I N GMORA for Samuel R. Delany
FNTC N SF for Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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RUNNERS UP

8U2 — Hannibal Lector's licence plate.
— Greg Walz
Pittsburgh, PA

I8A BEM
CARPOHL
— Daniel J. Lesco
Broadview Hts, OH

NOT EZ2C — the Invisible Man's license plate
UCME-NOT — slang version of the same.
— Neal H. Krape
York, PA

D4SBWTHU
— Steven D. Faber
Los Angeles, CA

COMPETITION 58 (suggested by Harlan Ellison)

Since we gave you an easy competition last time, we'll give you a challenge this time.

Cribbing shamelessly from a device conceived by Mary Ann Madden, Competition Editor of *New York Magazine*, Harlan Ellison suggests entrants be invited to devise *one* list of related names, using *only* names from the worlds of sf/fantasy/horr; beginning and ending with the same name; containing a total of eight, including bookends.

Harlan enclosed three examples:

HARLAN ELLISON, ROBERT SILVERBERG, SAMUEL MINES, REBECCA ORE, DAMON KNIGHT, ISAAC ASIMOV, AVRAM DAVIDSON, HARLAN ELLISON.

THEODORE STURGEON, SAX ROHMER, WILLIAM F. WU, ROBERT CONQUEST, GRAHAM MASTERTON, GIJER BUCHANAN, GARFIELD REEVES-STEVENS, THEODORE STURGEON.

PAUL ATREIDES, SIR ROGER FENWICK, DR. STRANGELOVE, TIN WOODMAN OF OZ, GERT FROBE, LITTLE FUZZY, THE HURKLE, PAUL ATREIDES.

A plea from the Competition Editor: Since my knowledge is not as encyclopedic as it should be, clues to most connections would be appreciated. Remember, the relationship between the names may be unusual: For example: Damon Knight — Isaac Asimov; Knight — Nightfall.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by Jan. 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 58 will appear in the May Issue.

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STEPHEN KING ISSUE: Limited edition of F&SF's December 1990 issue has a special cover stock and is available for only $10.00, plus $1.50 p/h. Mercury Press, PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

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Coming Attractions

IN FEBRUARY, **Kate Wilhelm** returns to these pages after a five-year absence. She provides our cover story, "Namint the Flowers," a science fiction suspense novella about Winston Seton, who meets a four-year old girl on a beach in Atlantic City. A four-year old girl who carries a lot of secrets. A four-year old girl who may be the granddaughter of a millionaire. Or she may be someone else. Someone younger, someone older. Someone the FBI is searching for, someone Seton can't stay away from.

Also in February, **Steve Perry** and **George Guthridge** revive their collaboration with a mystical science fiction story, "The Macaw." "The Macaw" is a tale of art, vision and love that uses the future as its setting, and the jungle as its backdrop.

Jerry Oltion, whose short stories won the Reader's Choice Awards in *Analog*, brings humor to the issue with "The Grass is Always Greener." Michael gets invited to a party filled with people — most of them men, all of them in T-shirts, Levis, and tennis shoes. They have a lot in common: they're all him.

In future issues, watch for wonderful novelettes from Marc Laidlaw, R. Garcia y Robertson, and Charles de Lint. Rob Chilson will play against type with a lovely ghost story, and David Brin will give us a peek into the future. New writer Carrie Richerson will take us back to a Texas haunted by the dead, and Richard Bowes will bring us the second in a series of short stories about urban mythology in New York City. Toss in Robert Reed, Harry Turtledove, and Ron Goulart, and the future looks very promising indeed.

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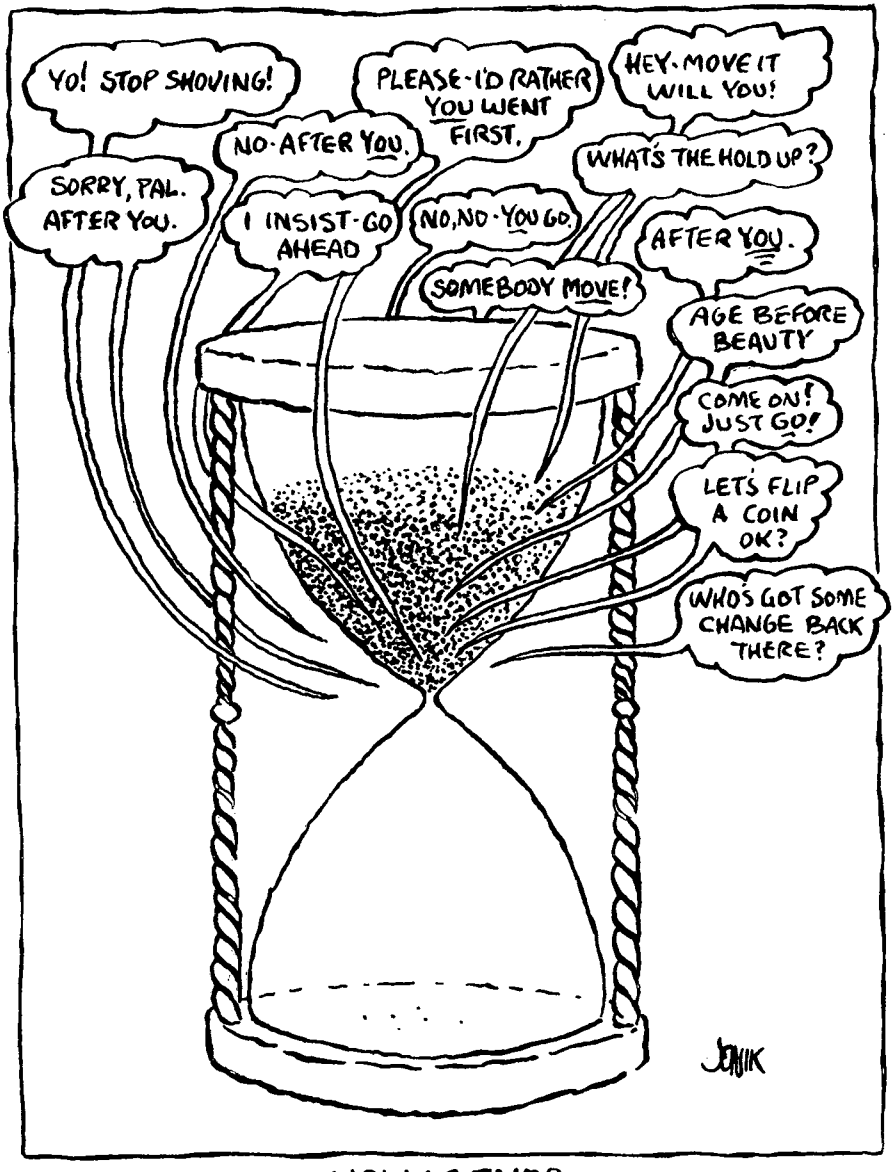

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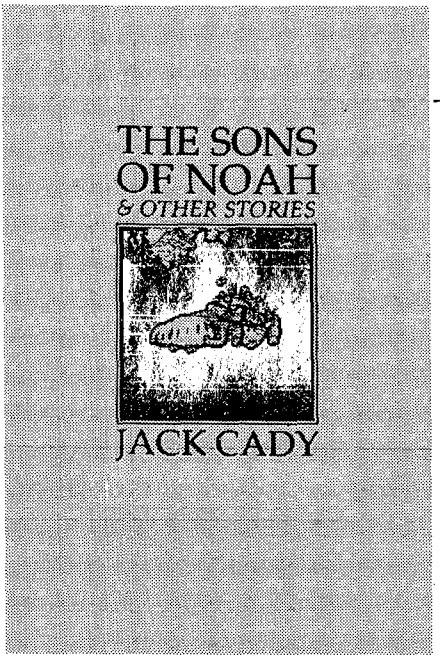

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